

HUMANISM AT THE LIMITS
[ALIENATION, DIFFERENCE, CRITIQUE]

by
Drew Walker

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Abstract

This dissertation emerges from an analysis of the recent focus on the vulnerability and finitude of human life as an ethical foundation for politics. I argue that this humanist turn reinforces the experience of vulnerability and precariousness and, thus, promotes a conservative politics of alienation and recovery rather than of active social transformation and a politics of difference. In this new humanist guise alienation is figured as a problem to be ameliorated by the recovery or recognition of our common finitude that we have presumably lost. In response, I present an approach to the human that pursues limit experiences of the human and forms of power and politics that persist and work at the margins of norms and experiences—what I call a “humanism at the limits.” To do so, I develop a model of alienation in which experiences of alienation are always multiple and historically and socially specific, and thus must be examined and worked against in their particularity.

I examine this image of the human and alienation through several problematics: the legacy of humanist Marxism and what I call “the Feuerbach problem” in critical thought; Judith Butler’s use of the figure of the human and its implications for social movements like AIDS activism; the dilemmas of subjectivity in the work of Butler and Louis Althusser and the subject’s relation to dominant forms of power; the possibility of a “weak,” or strategic, approach to critical theory that avoids the traps of strong, paranoid readings, particularly those that see the state as a threatening “cold monster”; and, finally, the project of failure as articulated by queer theories of politics and the

dramatic work of Samuel Beckett. This dissertation works to chart a course that recognizes the limits of human agency and that sees the conditions of alienation that attend them, but that attempts to resist the false choice of revolution or recovery. A humanism at the limits affirms that there are many lives worth living and promotes an image of politics that might see such lives proliferate in our contemporary conjuncture where such possibilities are both profound and precarious.

Dissertation Committee:

Samuel A. Chambers

William E. Connolly

Katrin Pahl

Nicolas Jabko

Angus Burgin

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Introduction

Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under. – Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question: What can be played? – Michel Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*

Despite the continual displacement of nearly every established conception of the human,¹ the figure of the human remains a powerful idea for political theorizing. The lure of the human drives both theorists who affirm an Enlightenment-inspired notion of the human as combining elements of autonomy, rationality, and responsibility as well as theorists who seek to disrupt that image by emphasizing the relational, embodied, finite, and even non-human characteristics of (human) existence. Moreover, in the era of human rights, the human has come to mark a status that promises protection from the “dehumanizing” effects of violence, discrimination, and other modes of injustice. In spite of these alluring promises, this dissertation argues that the figure of the human tends to obscure as much as it reveals and to exclude as much as it promises to include. The problem with humanisms—both those inspired by classical humanist tropes of autonomy and rationality and the “new” humanism based on a shared recognition of vulnerability and finitude—is that they both tend to operate according to a logic of alienation and recovery, and, thus, promote a vision of politics

¹ Indeed, contemporary science is now even challenging our image of the human down to the level of the organism in finding that our bodies consist of more “non-human” cells than “human” ones, that heavy metals and even parasites can affect the character of our brain function, and so on.

that depends upon what Gilles Deleuze calls a “reactive,” rather than creative, critique (1983 [1962]). In other words, alienation is read by and large as a problem to be solved or ameliorated by the recovery of that from which we have become alienated, thus playing a conservative function of reclaiming a lost essence. The strangeness of this development is that it emerges just as easily from theoretical attempts to displace the biases of Enlightenment-inspired liberal accounts of the human subject and political life as from those that seek to promote such a view of the human and politics. For, in the attempt to break up the model of the free, autonomous, and rational individual, this new mortalist humanism replaces it with another of its own: the human as primarily vulnerable, precarious, finite.

Thus, both of these humanist projects remain limited by a politics of recognition or reappropriation.² Like the liberal project of recognition, though ostensibly aimed at the project of pluralization and difference, theories of vulnerability and precariousness turn back on themselves in calling for the reappropriation or recognition of a (presumably lost or unrecognized) common human essence as a prerequisite for an ethical politics of difference. In this way, the projects ultimately remain conservative, or reactive, attempts to come to terms with the challenges of individual and collective

² Patchen Markell analyzes the limitations and binds of a politics of recognition in his volume *Bound by Recognition* (2009). Markell’s analysis develops out of the ongoing debate in political theory over the prospects for a politics of recognition that is notably explored in the work of Charles Taylor (1994) and Axel Honneth (1996). Markell’s criticism of the politics of recognition differs from Nancy Fraser’s insofar as Fraser (2004) sees the politics of recognition as a failure to address the redistribution of social and material goods. Markell, on the other hand, argues that the politics of recognition binds the subject in a particular identity, thus missing both the specificity of the particular individual and the possibility for identities to shift and change over time. The problems of politics of recognition are not my main concern in this dissertation, though I do see recognition as caught up in the dynamic of alienation and recovery that I discuss here.

life. My concern is that certain forms of these projects end up reinforcing more restrictive, constraining forms of liberal politics than those their projects seek to promote. Further, the problematic of alienation tends to reaffirm a dialectical mode of thought that reinforces stubborn dichotomies between the human and non-human (or the dehumanized), repression and liberation, structure and agency, freedom and oppression, rights and revolution, and public and private dimensions of agency. Thus, the problematics of alienation and recovery and of humanisms have powerful effects on how we understand the conditions of subjectivity and of communal life and the role that politics and critique might play therein.

My intention in this project is not to resolve these dichotomies once and for all. Instead, I am drawn to these puzzles because of the persistence of the human, alongside experiences of both alienation and agency, despite all that we might say about it and everything that might thwart it. In the face of the declarations of the dangers facing the public sphere of politics (Zerilli 2012), of the rendering of us all into biopolitical subjects of the neoliberal state (Agamben 1998 [1995]), and of the dehumanization of exclusive norms (Butler 2006b [2004]), human beings, like most other organisms, continue to survive and sometimes thrive despite (and because of) the difficulties they face. Yet, in insisting that the human *persists*, I must also clarify: first, the image of the human that I highlight and develop in this project is not one of an indomitable human spirit that manifests itself by overcoming obstacles for some genuine state of self expression. Instead, I am drawn to the unpredictable and

unexpected ways that the human and agency emerge in spite of systems of power—and modes of theorizing—that impede them or tend to cover them over. Second, I advocate not the optimism that can be found in the works of Saba Mahmood (2005) and James Scott (1985 and 1990), projects that locate modes of resistance in everyday life, no matter how mundane. Sometimes subjection is just subjection and breaking minor laws is just a matter of expedience and not part of a intentional project of subversion. Instead, I examine what expressions of human forms of life might show up if we were to think outside these persistent binaries. My claim is that human (and non-human, for that matter) life and agency exceed any attempt to capture them with a common essence—even the common fact of mortality—and that the human emerges in places outside or in between our ideal divisions between public and private, structure and agency, repression and freedom, human, non-human, or dehumanized. Thus, the attempt to capture something common about human experience—something upon which to ground ethics and politics—falls short, because human experience is so dynamic and manifold as to elude attempts to delimit any essence of this experience. Human beings do indeed have experiences of thought, agency, and they do identity as reflexive, intentional, and even at times self-same,³ and these forms of experience determine a significant part of our individual and collective lives. Yet, we also have powerful experiences of alienation in which our intentions are thwarted, and we find ourselves subjected beyond our complete control to our thoughts, our bodies, and

³ Even Nietzsche, the critic of Enlightenment subjectivity *par excellence*, recognizes something like this experience. But he argues that it comes late on the scene of experience, rather than as its original source. See *Daybreak*, Book II (1997 [1880]).

affective states from both within and without. Where (and how) theorists place their focus, then, will determine to a large degree what possibilities for individual and collective lives show up for them.

To that end, I take up a kind of Nietzschean image of the human as “a bridge and not a purpose, a dangerous on-the-way” (1985 [1892]: 15). Such an image requires resisting the tendency to attribute to the human an essential nature, whether that be freedom, dignity, rationality, language, or vulnerability and finitude. Nietzsche’s image of the rope over an abyss places us in a “zone of indiscernibility”⁴ between the human as an intentional agent and an affective assemblage, a rational actor and a dispersed, “larval” subject.⁵ Such a position is dangerous in a number of ways. First, it disrupts the theorist’s project of capturing an essential experience of the human as a basis for politics, and instead requires that the theorist be attentive to the unpredictable and sometimes seemingly insignificant—and to remain open to the insignificant is to open oneself, as theorist, to the criticism of irrelevance. Second, the image of the human as something non-essential poses a kind of threat to normative orders of identity and politics insofar as such an image presents a challenge to more settled models of what it means to be, act, and appear in ways that are recognizably “human.” Finally, this image of the human is dangerous for those who find themselves already outside of normative images of the human and who are struggling to survive in spite of and against their exclusion, for this image places into suspension prior criteria

⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?*, especially Chapter 7 (1990 [1994]).

⁵ See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Chapter 2 (1994 [1968]).

of the human by which outsiders might be able to make a claim for their humanness to be recognized. Outside a framework of recognition, we risk the possibility that those who exist beyond the limits of the normative image of the human will remain unrecognized and unacknowledged by dominant insiders—even the theorists seeking to bring their experience to light. Yet, as Nietzsche notes, taking up this project also allows us to see that what is great in the human is not a pre-given form of life to which we must remain conservatively tied, but is instead a possibility for creative and multiplicative expression of life itself. This potential creativity, however, will not be found in the final overcoming of alienation, but in continually going through it and working upon it as it is encountered again and again. Thus, in this project, I engage with a number of thinkers whose work promotes a “dangerous” view of the human, one that emerges in unexpected ways often at the limits of what is considered allowable—what I call a humanism at the limits.⁶

⁶ This range of authors includes Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, Samuel Beckett, Leo Bersani, and even Stanley Cavell. Though this group may appear as a motley crew of writers to draw upon, as I will show in the dissertation, they share important affinities in troubling received views of humanism, subjectivity, and politics. Further, particularly with respect to Deleuze and Foucault’s relationship to Althusser, there are significant connections between them that have long been obscured by the development of schools of thought that have at times demanded a certain orthodoxy in reading these philosophers. Warren Montag’s *Althusser and his Contemporaries* works to break up these orthodoxies by pointing to the historical/biographical, as well as intellectual, relationships shared between them (Montag 2013). Likewise, Paul Patton has noted the ways that Deleuze both drew from and moved away from a kind of Althusserian structuralism in his development of the concept of difference. As Patton writes in *Deleuze and the Political*, “In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze endorsed the concept of structural causality in terms of which Althusser and others sought to make sense of Marx’s thesis of economic determination.” (2000: 37).

Alienation and Reappropriation

I begin here with Nietzsche and Deleuze because together they present a powerful critique of the limitations of reactive critique and a politics of recovery, while also offering an alternative vision for active, creative critique.⁷ The task of critique can, of course, take on a number of forms: a project of judgment, one of reconciliation, one of unmasking or demystification, or even one of the multiplication of possible ways of thinking and acting in a given conjuncture. Here I follow Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche as a particularly powerful account of the dangers of reactive critique and the possibilities of critique as a project of creation and multiplication of possibilities for life. Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche was in many ways a refutation of readings of Nietzsche as a promoter of nihilism, exemplified for instance in Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche (1991 [1961]). Against such readings Deleuze makes the claim that Nietzsche actively works against nihilism and that, in fact, Nietzsche's targets are themselves the carriers of nihilism. Though Kant is often seen as Nietzsche's prime target (as Kant exemplifies, for Nietzsche, the problems of Enlightenment rationality and morality), Deleuze reads Nietzsche's project as a profound rejection of dialectics, and therefore as much anti-Hegel as anti-Kant.⁸ For Deleuze the dialectic always involves a kind of reactive thought because it functions under the assumption that there exists an original essence (of human nature, Being, the Divine, etc.) from which we have been alienated and which we must, then, recover. Deleuze reads Nietzsche

⁷ Deleuze himself suggests that this concept of creative critique was one of Nietzsche's most important contributions to the project of philosophy. See *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983 [1962]).

⁸ See *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983 [1962]: 162).

as working to escape the Hegelian dialectic and its emphasis on alienation and reappropriation in order to overcome the reactive forces of thought and promote an active, creative critique—outside the recuperative tendencies of dialectical thought.

For Deleuze, reading Nietzsche, the dialectic presents a two-fold problem. First, as a recuperative project, the dialectic always remains caught up in the problematic of alienation and reappropriation; thus, it functions as a reactive project that Deleuze argues ultimately ends in the kind of nihilism that is often attributed to Nietzsche. That is, from the perspective of the dialectic, there is always a gap or lack in being that can only be filled in through the process of recovery and recognition. Thus, second, the dialectic requires a universalist, comparative frame that is capable of judging whether or not something qualifies or counts as an appropriation of the original (alienated) essence. Dialectical thought, then, loses sight of the particular in its quest to overcome alienation. As Deleuze puts it, “The speculative motor of the dialectic is contradiction and its resolution. But its practical motor is alienation and the suppression of alienation, alienation and reappropriation...an art of *ressentiment*” (1983 [1962]: 160). Deleuze demonstrates this argument by pointing to the development of the dialectic from Hegel to Feuerbach to Stirner, a development through which the dialectic reveals itself as a project driven by egoism and nihilism.⁹ With Hegel, the human is reconciled with God; with Feuerbach, the human recovers its essence from the divine. But with Stirner, we arrive at the nihilistic end of the dialectic where the ego recovers itself but

⁹ Deleuze sees Stirner as the culmination of the nihilistic force of the dialectic. But as I argue in Chapter 2, the Feuerbachian legacy in Marxian and post-Marxian critical thought continues to haunt the project of critical theory today.

now only as a power that destroys everything as it seeks to take everything into itself.¹⁰

Quoting Stirner, Deleuze writes, “Overcoming alienation thus means pure, cold annihilation, a recovery which lets nothing which recovers subsist: ‘it is not that the ego *is* all, but the ego *destroys* all’” (Deleuze 1983 [1962]: 161; quoting Stirner 1973 [1845]: 182).

Thus, paradoxically for Deleuze, the dialectic, which promises to return the human to itself from the alienations first of the divine, then of the objectivity of the species being, and finally of its distance from its own ego, instead leads to an impoverished end and a new abstraction: that of the human as self-sufficient but alone, reunited but only through vulnerability and death: “*Negative nihilism* is replaced by *reactive nihilism*, reactive nihilism ends in *passive nihilism*. From God to God’s murderer, from God’s murderer to the last man” (1983 [1962]: 151). Nietzsche’s critique of the dialectic ultimately shows us “*the incapacity of this philosophy to end in anything but the ego, man or phantasms of the human*” (1983 [1962]: 162, emphasis in original).¹¹ Following this logic we can read the movements of humanism in parallel to the nihilism of the dialectic: Enlightenment humanism appears as a reactive critique against the limitations of the human that Kant documented so well, as a recuperation of the proper place of the human as bound by the limits of reason. Next has followed

¹⁰ Deleuze’s account of the development of the dialectic from Hegel to Stirner parallels Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the destructive development of instrumental rationality in which the human finally comes to master itself and the world at the cost of losing its individuality and its relation to the world of others (see *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 2002 [1947]).

¹¹ Deleuze also writes of the trope of the wretched man in Nietzsche, “The dialectical man is the most wretched because he is no longer anything but a man, having annihilated everything which was not himself. He is also the best man because he has suppressed alienation, replaced God and recuperated his properties” (1983 [1962]: 163).

the rise of a kind of “passive nihilism” with the replacement of the Enlightenment image of the human with one of the human as primarily vulnerable, finite, precarious. The reaction to the insufficiency of the Enlightenment view of the human has led to a new pacifism in which human vulnerability and finitude becomes the binding source for collective life. This turn to finitude has been meant to put our egos in check and even to stave off the move to *ressentiment*, but as Nietzsche and Deleuze show us, this turn remains caught by the same dialectical mode that can so quickly give rise to *ressentiment* instead. As Heidegger demonstrates in his early writings, the realization of our “being-towards-death” is no safeguard against the dangers of fascism. The focus on our vulnerability today seems no less promising a way to face the alienations of the contemporary condition.

Nietzsche, then, goes outside the reactive mode by posing a new mode of thought and a new conception of the human form of life. Deleuze describes Nietzsche's project of transvaluation as “*a new way of evaluating*: not a change of values, not an abstract transposition nor a dialectical reversal, but a change and reversal in the element from which the value of values derives, a ‘transvaluation’” (1983 [1962]: 163, emphasis in original). Here we can see the difference between the kind of transvaluation that Deleuze presents through Nietzsche and the kind that someone like Charles Taylor promotes. For Taylor, humans are able to enact experiences of transvaluation because “all interpretation can be judged as more or less adequate, more or less distortive” (1985b: 75). Transvaluation, then, becomes possible

when one is able to move from a less adequate or more distorted interpretation of one's experience to a more adequate or less distorted one.¹² But for Deleuze the power of becoming and the transformation of values is never a matter of more or less. Rather, with Nietzsche he argues for a transvaluation that depends not on a prior standard, but on creative destruction of prior standards and a positive attempt at a new expression. Difference, then, is seen as multiplicative, often requiring the destruction of prior standards for the new to emerge. Here "affirmation conceived of as acceptance, as affirmation of that which is, as truthfulness of the true or positivity of the real, is a false affirmation...this false conception of affirmation is still a way of preserving man" (1983 [1962]: 184). As Deleuze strikingly writes, "The world is neither true nor real but living" (184). In such a model of critique and the becoming of difference the movement of social "progress" like the movement of woman from homemaker to breadwinner or homosexuality from forbidden to legally protected cannot be read as a simple matter of liberation and recognition, but as the destruction of a previous mode of representation and the creation of the new.¹³ In other words, Deleuze encourages an image of difference and becoming that does not always depend of a smooth story of progress that takes place within one coherent or homogenous medium. Thus, social and political change cannot be read as the unfolding, say, of a liberal project of

¹² For a fuller (and classic) discussion of the limitations of Taylor's (early) political and ethical project, see William E. Connolly's "Taylor, Foucault, Otherness" (1985), as well as Taylor's response, "Connolly, Foucault, and Truth" (1985a).

¹³ Much like Rancière's notion of dissensus, here a new scene, or "partition of the sensible" is created, not just the liberation of a previously existent mode of being (Rancière 1999 [1995]: 26). For a larger discussion of this dynamic, see Chambers (2013).

tolerance and recognition. Instead, the pursuit of difference often requires a reconfiguration of a given order, rather than a recovery or extension of a common essence.

Begging to Differ

Thus, for Deleuze and Nietzsche positive critique requires a conception of difference that goes beyond the affirmation “of what is” and the functions of comparison and opposition (cf. 1983 [1962]: 183).¹⁴ The point is to displace modes of thought that rely on preconceived standards by which to judge difference. And whereas the dialectic leads to nihilism and *ressentiment*, comparative orders of representation forestall the ability to see and participate in the becoming of difference. Spivak, of course, famously argues that the critique of representation in Foucault and Deleuze repeats the totalizing and silencing force of Euro-centric Enlightenment thought and prevents us from the hearing the subaltern speak (1988). Yet, I turn to Deleuze here for exactly the opposite effect: as a framework for illuminating difference outside of the dialectical, representative, and human-centered mode of thought. My claim is that the human conceived as “a bridge and not an end” comes into view not through a lens that sees various conditions as more or less human, but through a lens that finds various, often aberrant, expressions of the human as expressions of difference, as possible forms of life. For Deleuze difference cannot just be the

¹⁴ Elsewhere Deleuze writes, “The negative expires at the gates of being. Opposition ceases its labour and difference begins its play” (1983 [1962]: 190).

repetition of something in a modified way, as in a series of A, A', A'', and so on, or a kind of repetition of a thing that compares more or less to what it repeats. For this way of thinking of difference and repetition remains only an additive or subtractive difference that stays at the level of representation and mediation, which in turn stays in the realm of the dialectic of alienation and reappropriation. Instead, Deleuze proposes a way of thinking difference and repetition as active processes of reconsidering and redrawing limits as part of series of selection, creation, and expression. Here difference is made, not determined or found. To make this point more concrete, I turn now briefly to consider the modes of representation that Deleuze argues obscure the expression of difference by remaining in a mode of comparison and abstraction.

Organic Representation

Deleuze first takes on Plato and Aristotle as the kind of philosophers who attempt to mediate or tame difference through a philosophy of categorization and judgment. Both posit a finite limit or ground which allows for judgments based on differences in relation to this ground. Aristotle judges by marking out oppositions and contraries, by locating specific differences under genera (Deleuze 1994 [1968]: 30). This system of species and genera is ultimately one of representation and reflection: “the univocity of species in a common genus refers back to the equivocality of being in

various genera: the one reflects the other" (1994 [1968]: 34).¹⁵ Difference, then, can only take on a negative role as designating "catastrophes: either breaks of continuity in the series of resemblances or impassable fissures between the analogical structures" (1994 [1968]: 35).¹⁶ For Plato, on the other hand, the process of division is not one of identifying difference in order to determine species. Instead, it is one of "selection among rivals, the testing of claimants" in their relation to reality, the *Ideas*: "It is not a question of identifying but authenticating" (1994 [1968]: 60). Here things participate in the pure *Idea* of them to a greater or lesser degree, and Plato is concerned with distinguishing their degrees of participation in the Idea in order to weed out the inauthentic. Difference here is related to non-being and only measures the distance between the Idea and the thing, or the original and the copy (1994 [1968]: 64). If we consider how a concept like "the human" might function in the organic mode of thought, the human becomes either a genus under which we might allow certain modes of life as specific expressions of the genus; or the human becomes a kind of ideal against which we might compare conditions and behaviors as human, inhuman, dehumanized. As such, the organic mode appears unable to come to terms either with expressions of life that fall outside of established criteria or with the ways that humans

¹⁵ This system of genera and species as branches of a common tree of being points to Deleuze and Guattari's later and more explicit critique of arborial thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]: Introduction).

¹⁶ Despite this misconstruing of difference, difference in Deleuze's sense still seems to be lurking here insofar as this process of specification is a selection from a "confused species" or milieu in order to create lines of specification (1994 [1968]: 59-60).

living in “inhuman” conditions persist in and struggle against these conditions, perhaps producing expressions of difference within these very conditions themselves.

Orgiastic Representation

In opposition to organic representation, which functions by judging, Deleuze offers orgiastic representation, which functions by expressing (1994 [1968]: 43). Unlike the finite determinations of organic representation where everything is judged in relation to a finite ground, in orgiastic representation the telos is not the limit from which things spring, but that toward which things converge (1994 [1968]: 43). That is, the telos acts like a call for the multiplication of finite things, even as it brings them back together again in a kind of reappropriation (in the end). Here difference is made by the introduction of some infinite concept (the Good, negativity, etc.) that then serves as the goal toward which things move or strive. We see this in Hegel in the movement of all things toward the realization of absolute Spirit.¹⁷ The problem here is that “*infinite representation does not free itself from the principle of identity as a presupposition of representations*” (1994 [1968]: 49). It still “invokes a foundation” that it gives “an infinite value” and allows it “to reign over existence itself” (1994 [1968]: 49). The problem still seems to be the positing of one principle by which we could judge everything that exists, even as the principle allows an infinite number of

¹⁷ Deleuze also turns to Leibniz to show how he sees this in relation to his notion of compossible worlds—the infinite there would be maximum continuity in a maximum number of cases, without divergence (would lead to impossibility). (1989 [1985]: 126). For a discussion of Deleuze’s study of film, particularly as it relates to his political thought, see Paola Marrati’s *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy* (2008 [2003]).

entities to come into existence and express themselves. In the regime of the orgiastic, then, "the human" appears as the big happy family that promises to be just around the corner as we realize more and more the universality of human rights, cosmopolitanism, and the like.

Thus, for Deleuze difference and repetition cannot be generality or representation, nor do they act as a model or original essence and its copies or manifestations. To begin to get at what repetition and difference might mean, then, we must reconsider existence and its phenomena not as things in themselves or as expressions of an essence or things in themselves, but as simulacra that lack an authentic or originary essence. Difference and repetition appear as an effect, a mask, a symbol, a sign—that is as something that is nonessential, even if it has become durable, sedimented, perhaps even rigid. It seems that this kind of disguising or covering over would mean that difference has something to hide, which we might uncover with a kind of phenomenological hermeneutics, or that the disguising might render the repetition ineffectual in covering it over. Yet, for Deleuze the unrepresentable nature of the mask/the simulacra means that it must always be signified through its enactment—through its signaling to other entities and through its responding to them. Thus, its masking may not be a hiding or covering over, but a cover that *gives shape* to something to allow it to have an effect. Deleuze presents an example of the theater: masks in the theater do not cover over anything essential to the performance; instead, they allow the performance to be enacted, for an effect to be

produced, for a communication/signaling to take place.¹⁸ Beneath the mask is another series of masks that allows the carrying out of roles on various stages or realms of life, in various systems of signals, none of which are more authentic or original than another. Behind the mask is a person, yes, but a person who herself performs a series of other roles each with its own sets of expression and masks—mother, father, lover, worker, boss. There is no ontological primacy to these positions. Some are more settled than others, but none of them are definitive. They work together as an assemblage in their effects. So, read one way, there is always a kind of gap between the role and the actor, but not a gap of negativity, lack, or of an alienation that needs recovering. Instead there is a gap in a series, that keeps the movement going, not a chasm that must be bridged, but a spacing that is necessary to the assemblage itself. The human here is an enactment of affects and expression, not something essential that might serve as a cornerstone for politics and ethics. “The human” of course remains very real and very powerful, even in my project here, but it can still perform this role as a function of difference. Much like Jane Bennett’s image of the “useful fiction of the subject,” which operates for her as a placeholder for the bodily center of experience in an examination of a materiality and affect, my image of the human operates as a important site of experience and theory, even it lacks a permanently coherent essence or being (see Bennett 2010: Introduction).

¹⁸ For another discussion of the relationship between Deleuze’s philosophy and theatricality, see *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy* (1994).

Passing By?

The question remains how to capture an image of the human, and even alienation, without getting stuck in the binds of the dialectics of reappropriation, recognition, and representation. It is tempting to imagine the possibility of getting outside or beyond contemporary forms of power that condition our lives and to which we are subjected. These images seduce us with their promises of escape from the binds of our contemporary condition, even as they likewise provide us with tools to see everywhere the subjugating exercise of power, control, and stratification. In this project, I take a different tack, though one that is moved in a different way by a kind of Deleuzian and Foucaultian impulse. For as much as these two have inspired us with the possibilities of escape, they have also insisted that there is no real “beyond” and that the pursuit of lines of flight are just as likely to lead into “black holes” as they are into experiences liberated from the organizing forces of the state and society. In articulating a humanism at the limits, I try to take seriously the caution that is also contained in Foucault’s notion of experiment, which implies that we can only ever just experiment with going beyond our limits and even if there is no pure “beyond” (see Foucault 1997 [1984]). The question is whether such experimentation might just be enough to shift the balance of power from time to time. In other words, I suggest that dwelling for a while at the limits of the human—*staying with* the experiences of alienation, the inhuman, subjection, failure, and the often cold power of state

politics—that we find various, and valuable forms of life at the boundaries of inside and outside, human and inhuman, freedom and subjection.

In taking this approach, I am following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's thoughts on what the use of the prepositions "beyond, beneath, and beside" mean for how we do critical work (2003: 8). Here Sedgwick draws a different lesson from Deleuze (and from Sylvan Tomkins) than the drive for lines of flight and means of escape. As I am in this dissertation, Sedgwick is skeptical about the helpfulness of critique as a project that promises the unmasking of an original essence or truth or the arrival at a final goal that promises to overcome all our dilemmas. With great aplomb, she admonishes the critical project of the "bossy gesture of 'calling for' an imminently perfected critical or revolutionary practice that one can oneself only adumbrate" (2003: 8). In her attempt to bypass some of the pitfalls of a critical approach that exposes hidden sources of trouble in our literary and political practices by calling for us to get beneath and/or beyond them, she suggests that we consider the preposition *beside* as offering a different approach. She proposes that the word *beside* introduces a "spatial description into narratives of, respectively, origin and telos" (2003: 8). As she suggests, *beside* "permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking" but one that does not "depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations" (2003: 9). The look *beside* does not attempt to neutralize the problems under investigation, but it allows for another possible set of answers to them. This approach resists the feedback loop of critical approaches to agency and

subjectivity in which the hegemonic serves as the given structure of norms and power and the subversive as “a purely negative relation to that” (2003: 12). Instead, Sedgwick suggests that attention to the “middle ranges of agency” between or beside dialectical binaries might better illuminate the spaces from which creativity and change emerge (2003: 13). Taking this approach, then, might require, like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, “passing by” the temptation to take up modes of critique that promise liberation through the tools of unmasking and the overcoming of alienation which simultaneously threatening with the dangers of nihilism and reactive critique.

The dissertation proceeds, then, in two major stages. In the first two chapters, I offer a diagnosis of the effects of the persistence in contemporary critical thought of the problematic of humanism and its attendant model of alienation and recovery. In Chapter 1, “Humanism, Alienation, and the Feuerbach Problem,” I frame this diagnosis in terms of what I call the “Feuerbach problem” in critical theory. Particularly, in the context of what Bonnie Honig has called a “new humanism”—her effort to capture the recent turn to vulnerability and finitude as an ethical basis for politics—the framework for alienation and recovery is returning to political thought. I argue that these new humanisms are manifestations of the Feuerbach problem in critical thought in that they place too great a faith in the recovery of a lost or forgotten human essence to solve the deep divisions and challenges of life in late modernity, much like Marx did in his early

Feuerbach-inspired focus on recovery of the species being. Drawing from Althusser's reading of Marx, which insists on a break between Marx's early humanist period and his later "scientific" period, I argue that the "new humanism" in critical thought remains tied to a humanist approach to critique which almost inevitably leads to the worst elements of the politics of liberalism. The tendency of a politics driven by the overcoming of alienation is to overstate the power of recognition and recovery to liberate us from these alienating conditions. Further, the turn to vulnerability and finitude reinforces the liberal model of a politics of protection meant to shore us up from the dangers that we pose to one another. Finally, by presuming that the problem is a general condition of alienation and that the solution is the full recovery of some human essence or condition, this problematic short-circuits the very political negotiation of the terms of the human. Instead, I present a model of alienation in which experiences of alienation are always multiple and historically and socially specific, and thus must be examined and worked against in their specific contexts.

In Chapter 2, "The Politics of Mattering," through a reading of Judith Butler's work on the figure of the human, I put into question the language of the human, the inhuman, and dehumanization that has become a common frame for criticizing the abuses of state power and practices of social violence and inequality. I argue that Butler's work presents two distinct images of the human with very different effects. First, in her recent focus on "grievability" and the precariousness of human life, Butler offers a view of the human as a subject position necessary for one's life to matter and

bear political agency. This image, I argue, produces more problems that it solves, for it risks overstating the power of the "human" to protect us from violence and injustice. It likewise provides too easy an explanation of these conditions—one that reads the cause of such violence as the result of the dehumanization of the other. Second, Butler presents an image of the human as more dynamic field of contestation where the terms of the human can be debated and put to the test. This image of the human comes closer to realizing the potential of Butler's notion of performativity to trouble the terms of the human and illuminate a politics of difference.

To illuminate the consequences of these two images of the human, I turn to responses to the AIDS epidemic and the way that the "humanness" of its victims has been portrayed in critical accounts of it. Following Leo Bersani, I argue against theories that see the abandonment of gay men during the AIDS epidemic as evidence that they were not considered human, and thus did not matter. Instead of focusing on their potential grievability in public acts of mourning like the making of the AIDS quilt, I highlight how their form of life as a devious, dangerous expression of the human mattered intensely as a potential disruption of normative orders of sexuality and kinship. A politics of the human, then, cannot aim at the recovery of the humanness of the abject through the recognition of their finitude; instead, it must aim at illuminating those moments where the human expresses itself in spite of the attempts to stifle it or even snuff it out.

In Chapter 3, "Interpellation and the Dilemmas of Subjectivity," I continue this analysis of Butler and Althusser, but here I shift to the question of the subject as it emerges out of the problematic of alienation and humanism. As many of Butler's commentators have described, the promises of Butler's theory of performativity and subversion have continually been weighed down by her turn to the grief over what she calls "the sorry bind" of subjectivity. In this chapter, I show how Butler's enduring commitment to a politics of recognition has led to a theory a subject that expresses a longing for a recuperation of a freely chosen state of subjectivity that can never be—a view of the subject that is on the road to the kind of reactive critique that stifles the politics of difference that she begins to put into play. Thus, I read her theory of the subject specifically through her appropriation and criticism of Althusser's concept of interpellation, arguing that her misreading of Althusser is symptomatic of her desire for a self-determining subject. Then, through a re-reading of Althusser's theory of interpellation and ideology as well as his theory of the state, I suggest that in giving up the grief over a self-determined subject that never was, Althusser presents us with possibilities for challenging the terms of political life that emerge out of the very conditions of subjection. By affirming the alienated conditions of subjectivity, rather than grieving it, Althusser offers the possibility model of theorizing the politics of the subject, ideology, and the state that can avoid the dilemmas of structure and agency, rather than further entrench them.

Chapter 4, "Warming Up to the Cold Monster," considers the relation between critical thought and the possibilities for state politics. In this chapter, I argue that one of the results of the dialectic of the critical mode of alienation and recovery has been the tendency to adopt a paranoid relation to the power of the "cold monster" of the state. In response, drawing from Foucault's late lectures on neoliberalism as well as from Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of state capitalism, I propose taking up a strategic logic that takes a more localized approach the powers of the state and the dynamics of power that might resist the tendency to totalizing readings of the state. Following Sedgwick's notion of "weak" theory, I develop an approach to the state that is attentive to the ambivalences of state power and that resists collapsing the heterogeneous elements and effects of the state into a unified whole. To illustrate this case, I turn to the debate over same-sex marriage amongst feminist and queer theorists, which has for a long time, played out in stark terms: same-sex marriage has been read either as part of a smooth story of the progress of human rights or as a capitulation to the normalizing effects of state power. Both of these cases present a strong reading of the state that tend to collapse a dynamic set of variables—including kinship, electoral and judicial politics, neoliberal ideology, individual and collective forms of desire, the uneven distribution of state privileges—into a tightly woven whole. The strength of weak theory and strategic logic is that it helps us to loosen up this whole; its weakness is that it does not promise a final answer or goal. Instead, as with this dissertation as a

whole, this chapter aims to present a vision of politics as part of the creative multiplication of possibilities for (both human and non-human) life.

Following this reconsideration of the conditions of subjectivity and interpellation, I then move to the question of the efficacy of failure in Chapter 5, "Failure: The Best Medicine?". In this chapter, I take up the work of Samuel Beckett and recent discussions of failure in queer theory. Contemporary thinking about politics has a difficult time finding in the experience of failure any form of agency or power that might contribute to political life. Yet, many queer theorists have come to see the experience of queerness, and the unusual forms of power and subversion that come with it, as uniquely characterized by the experience of failure—in the failure of queer bodies and forms of life to conform to dominant norms of kinship, bodies, sexual life, and so on. Failure, likewise, dramatizes most starkly our experiences of alienation from our intentions, from our desires from our collective endeavors. The question remains open of whether dwelling with failure should serve as an "anti-social" project of queerness (e.g., Lee Edelman's *No Future*) or an aspect of queer life to be celebrated (e.g., Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*). Taking another tack, I turn to the work of Samuel Beckett as offering an alternative vision of failure, one that finds in failure a peculiar form of power and resistance, even as it recognizes the inability of failure itself to ever meet its mark (that is failing completely).

I then offer a reading of *Endgame* that highlights Beckett's thematization of the limit experiences of agency's failures and the suspensions of time and meaning in late modern life. On my reading, Beckett dramatizes the persistence of both alienation and agency at the limits of zones of the political, intelligibility, and experiences of subjectivity. Beckett then, gives a strange model that can help dramatize the dilemmas of (queer) projects of subversion in which such projects are always risky endeavors, where failure risks both failing to fail (and getting recaptured by dominant norms) and failing completely (that is, coming to nothing). In light of this reading, I consider two examples—one from lesbian separatist movements and the other from the Occupy movement—to consider the pursuit of failure and the possibility of its power. Queer communities, like the Van Dykes of the 1970's, have long recognized the potential agency of rejecting normative demands of identity and belonging, even though this agency is realized outside normative forms of politics and community. In a different way, Occupy took up a kind of political project of "failure" in its refusal of traditional political models of negotiation that too easily risked subsumption into existing policy positions or structures. Beckett's plays, I argue, provide a perspective to see these movements as indicative of the conditions of late modern life where experiences of agency and alienation are pushed to the limit.

The dissertation as a whole considers the possibilities for (human) life in the pursuit of a politics of difference and a project of positive, creative, rather than reactive critique. In so doing, I work to develop a perspective on the human that takes up both

Nietzsche's image of the human as a bridge, not an end, and Foucault's challenge to pursue the project of "What can be played?". Thus, I call this project a "humanism at the limits" because it pursues limit experiences of the human and forms of power and politics that persist and work often at the margins of norms and expectations. In this way, the dissertation resists the lure of grounding politics and ethics in a common human essence, for such a move places us, as Nietzsche and Deleuze suggest, on the path to reaction and *ressentiment* when we find that the recovery is blocked or impeded. The project also considers our limits from another direction: as a consideration of the limitations that our contemporary conjuncture places on us. Here we encounter the apparently unstoppable power of state capitalism, forces of war, and changing climates. These limit conditions tend to push both more conservative and more radical critical projects to hold fast to the demands for ethical recognition or for a kind of "ruthless critique of everything existing." My dissertation tries to chart a different course, one that recognizes our limits and that sees and feels the conditions of alienation that attend them as well as the desire to amend or escape them. A humanism at the limits, as I see it, requires moments both of rage and refusal, and of compromise and conciliation. A humanism at the limits affirms that there are many lives worth living and promotes an image of politics that might see such lives proliferate in a conjuncture where such possibilities are both profound and precarious.

Humanism, Alienation, and the Feuerbach Problem

Humanism and Alienation

From the late-modern turn against existentialism, to the ascendance of “post-humanism” and affect theory, one would expect humanist thought to be finally finished, and yet recent critical thought has been marked by the emergence of a new humanism. Likewise, the language of alienation, which often accompanies humanist thought, would appear to have been killed off by its association with the politics of authenticity that emerged from certain humanist brands of existentialism that ended up reinforcing the autonomous, voluntarist subject that it was meant to displace and by its inability in Marxian-inspired critical theory to overcome the complexity of contemporary capitalism and the capitalist exploitation of human and non-human resources. Yet, despite this waning of the language of alienation, the *problematic* of alienation has been sneaking back in. Indeed, it has been smuggled in by the new humanism. The return of this problematic is occurring in the unlikelyst of places: in the work of theorists like Judith Butler and Stephen White, whom Bonnie Honig has characterized as producing a new “mortalist” humanism that seeks to promote a new ethical grounds for politics based on the shared human condition of vulnerability, precariousness, and finitude (Honig 2010: 1).¹⁹ These theorists of vulnerability and

¹⁹ As Honig has shown, this new humanist theme differs from earlier humanisms in that “what is common to humans is not rationality but the ontological fact of mortality, not the capacity to reason but vulnerability to suffering” (2010: 1). That is, rather than the promise of rationality and the deliberative

finitude see their projects as working to overcome the autonomous, voluntarist model of the subject that we have inherited from Enlightenment humanism and that has proved insufficient for dealing effectively with the challenges of contemporary life.²⁰

In this chapter I argue that this new humanism not only risks displacing politics for ethics, but more importantly it leads to *bad politics*. It does so in two primary ways. First, in positing the common fact of human finitude and the recognition of and proper orientation to this finitude as the basis for politics, the focus on mortality remains bound up in the dialectic of alienation and recovery, the problems that I began analyzing in the introduction. That is, this orientation to politics works on a model of recognition in which the task of politics and ethics is the recognition and recovery of a common human essence from which we have presumably become alienated. Examples of this problematic of alienation and recovery abound: the recovery of our sense of mortality promises liberation from the alienating effects of unequal

practices of democracy to help us overcome these exploitative conditions, this new “mortalist” humanism suggests that a recognition of the human condition of finitude – whether theorized as mortality, vulnerability, or precariousness – is crucial for enacting a moral ethical politics. For Honig, the trouble with this new humanism is twofold. First, it displaces politics for ethics and for an inward turn to the self, rather than a turn outward to an agonistic politics in the world of others. Second, in focusing on mortality, the new humanism misses the conditions and possibilities of natality and creativity born from the agon of politics. Honig’s analysis of the new humanism goes a long way toward showing the problems of grounding politics in an ethical turn to the fact of mortality. But, as I will argue in this chapter, there are other important issues at stake in this turn to a new humanism.

²⁰ See Butler’s explicit rejection of the claim that she is promoting a new humanism in *Precarious Life*: “By insisting on a ‘common’ corporeal vulnerability, I may seem to be positing a new basis for humanism. That might be true, but I am prone to consider it differently...if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject” (2006b [2004]: 43-44). In this way, Butler tries to avoid the charge of humanism, but as I argue in Chapter 2, the problematics of humanization and recognition remain inextricably bound by the tropes of humanism, alienation, and recovery that actually give too much weight to the very norms of recognition that Butler wishes to displace.

experiences of and exposure to violence (Butler 2006b [2004]), from the drive to mastery and the traps of existential revenge (White 2009),²¹ and from the totalizing effects of the experience of bare life in a biopoliticized world (Agamben 1998 [1995]). Second, a mortalist humanism tends to reinforce two of the most persistent and troublesome elements of liberal politics. Most strikingly, the focus on the conditions of vulnerability and finitude calls up the scene of the liberal state of nature that leads to a politics of protection and to the image of a “buffered” or “capacious”²² subject that the new humanism seeks to avoid. Likewise, this vision of politics can give rise to too-smooth stories of progress insofar as they suggest that the recognition and recovery of a common human essence will, in Honig’s words, “soften us up” and clear the road for more humane and equal treatment of others based upon mutual recognition.²³

I do not disagree with the new humanist claim that a recognition of shared human finitude might spark a more ethical approach to politics and public life, and I affirm that human experience is indeed marked by experiences of alienation. But

²¹ Interestingly, White takes his cues for this project from William Connolly’s work, but he drops out the very characteristics of Connolly’s work that seek to avoid the conservative dimensions of the ethical turn. In particular, he does not follow Connolly’s process oriented thought, most notably embodied in the latter’s focus on pluralization and a world of becoming (see Connolly 1995 and 2013).

²² White uses the term “capacious” in an unusual way. The term could easily be read as a certain openness or porosity of the subject to the world of others. As such, the subject’s capaciousness could be read as the opposite of what Charles Taylor calls the “buffered” liberal subject that is closed off from as an autonomous individual (Taylor 2007). However, White’s use of capaciousness draws from the word’s root in the notion of being capable. Thus, White’s capacious liberal subject has the classically liberal character of a strong, independent will and the capacity to act freely in the world. White, then, wants to shift the notion of capaciousness toward a more open, porous direction. As he writes, “Our capaciousness does indeed mean that we can master much in the world, but such projections always remain arrayed before a background of remaining inarticulacy. As *capacious*, we are always also *captive* in this sense. This shift in the sense of capaciousness also allows for its becoming less central in our understanding of human dignity” (2009: 51).

²³ Honig argues, “Finitude is said to soften us up for the call of the other, to open us up to the solicitations of ethics and bypass the intractable divisions of politics” (2010: 1).

boiling the problem of alienation down to one dimension or aspect of human life—a dimension that might deliver or protect us from the more intractable dilemmas of politics, ethics, and subjectivity—overlooks the multiple and specific ways that we are alienated and the multiple, and often creative, ways that we humans seek to live and deal with these conditions of alienation in social and political life. Thus, the logic of alienation and recovery is insufficient because it poses the problem of alienation as if its solution were the return to origins. In reference to the Feuerbachian influence on early Marxism, I call this “the Feuerbach problem,” and I argue that it continues to drive the spirit of much of left critical thought. I suggest that these new humanisms are manifestations of the Feuerbach problem in critical thought in that they place too great a faith in the recovery of a lost or forgotten human essence to solve the deep divisions and challenges of life in late modernity—much like Marx did in his early Feuerbach-inspired focus on the recovery of the species-being of man through the recovery of labor that has been alienated through the productive forces and processes of capitalism. The tendency of a politics driven by the overcoming of alienation is to overstate the power of both recognition and reappropriation to liberate us from these alienating conditions. As William Connolly has suggested, the conditions of alienation extend beyond one realm of life or another. Some of these conditions cannot be resolved, but only dealt with. As he writes, “Some modes of alienation need to be resolved and others need to be *transfigured* into modes of existential affirmation of the human condition” (Connolly 2012). The demands of contemporary life may then

require a conception of politics that emerges from the practices and forms of life that persist in spite of and alongside various experiences of alienation instead of a politics that promises a recovery from or overcoming of such experiences.

The Feuerbach Problem

In order to make this case, I propose a reexamination of the humanist debates, and Louis Althusser's contribution in particular, over the nature of the Marxist project, for some of the most trenchant insights and criticisms of the politics of alienation and recovery emerge from these debates. Unfortunately, these insights, including the recognition of the tendency of critical projects to return to the problematics of humanism and alienation, have been largely obscured by the ugliness of disciplinary debates that saw the rise of the intransigence of competing Marxist orthodoxies and of the structuralist/post-structuralist divide. So, to return to this terrain seems somewhat risky.²⁴ But I think it is a risk worth taking.²⁵ The contemporary condition bears some striking similarities to the social and political foment of the 1960's, in which the stakes of humanism for Marxism and critical theory in general were vociferously contested.

²⁴ Indeed, the aftermath both of the disciplinary debates over the role of humanism for Marxist theory (and revolution) late 20th-century French Marxism and of the apparent failures of the 1968 uprisings left us seemingly no closer to ameliorating the repressive conditions of capitalist modernity and can still drag us back into a tangle of disciplinary battles that might seem better left behind. Thus, Jacques Rancière suggests in answering the question of the turn to the human and humanitarianism, "It was obviously impossible to revive the Marxist critique" (2004: 298). In this chapter, however, I question this impossibility.

²⁵ There has been a slow return to Althusser since the late 1990's, particularly as his later texts have been made available in English translation. This renewed interest can be seen in special issues devoted to a rereading of Althusser in *Rethinking Marxism* (Callari and Ruccio 1998) and *borderlands* (David McNerney 2005). This later writing of Althusser's with its emphasis on Spinoza, on readings of figures in the history of political thought, and on a kind of aleatory materialism tends to be read as a "good" Althusser versus the "bad" early Althusser with its structuralist Marxism.

As in the late 60's, the current climate is marked by frustration on the left with a decade of war and war crimes, tightened connections between state and capital, and the apparent inability of both protest and electoral politics to challenge these conditions effectively. Though the tropes of humanism always seem to maintain their appeal to various degrees, times like these intensify the drive to locate and recover a common human essence as a possible key to overcoming these conditions. But in so doing, these tropes threaten to result in the kind of reactive, and even passive, nihilism that I highlighted in the Introduction.

The point, then, is not to revive or relive these older disciplinary debates, but rather to show that the logic of alienation and recovery and its dangers still persist in the logic and practices of critical thought. Thus, Althusser's argument can cast critical light on these categories and what they mean for contemporary theory and life. For Althusser, humanism provides an ideological ideal of the human that does not take the particular conjuncture into consideration and instead operates under a liberal model of rationality as a move from darkness to light. He writes:

The couple human/inhuman is the hidden principle of all humanism which is, then, no more than a way of living-sustaining-resolving this contradiction. Bourgeois humanism made man the principle of all theory. This luminous essence of man was the visible counterpart to a shadowy inhumanity...With this wish [to overcome terror, repression, and dogmatism] we move from the shade to the light, from the inhuman to the human...a world that can do without shadows or tragedies. (2005 [1965]: 236-237)

This is the world we still live in. Today's focus on the vulnerability of humans is still a move from inhumanity to humanity, though it is now differently inflected.

Contemporary conceptions of the human no longer seek simply to overcome these conditions, but to fold the inhuman, the spectral, the unreal into what it means to be human. This may feel like a step in right direction, but it does not yet help us overcome the problematic of alienation and recovery. For it still remains too “simple”²⁶ to take this kind of position and make it into a claim like Agamben’s—one that sees the conditions of contemporary life as all already conscripted to the camp of biopoliticized life. As such, the possibilities for life and politics remain trapped within the boundaries of alienated inhumanity and the promise of a restored life. And, again, such a move elides the various ways that people seek to live in spite of and to work against these experiences of alienation. The recovery of a common sense of mortality, though, still provides powerful comfort insofar as we imagine that we can bring those in darkness into the light, even when the light has grown so dim as to illuminate only the barest common fact of life—mortality.

Feuerbach’s Legacy

Certainly the whole of left critical thought cannot be reduced to a Marxist legacy, and there are plenty of theorists who may object to my attributing to the enterprise of critical theory the continued haunting of the “specters of Marx” (Derrida

²⁶ I intentionally use the word “simple” to invoke the spirit of Althusser’s essay “Is It Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?” (1976 [1975]). In this essay, he argues for the difficulty of taking up a non-traditional (i.e., humanist) Marxism in the milieu of 20th-century thought. Likewise, several of the other theorists that I draw on in this project work to contest the frame of what Deleuze calls the “everyone knows” that seems to drive critical thought toward the same taken-for-granted assumptions (Deleuze 1994 [1968]: Chapter 3). See also Chapter 5 where I take up a discussion of Eve Sedgwick’s criticism of the paranoid mode of reading which she argues now dominates critical theory.

2006 [1994]). That said, my point is to highlight the degree to which dialectical approaches to critical thought continue to be informed by the Feuerbachian-early Marxian appropriation of the dynamics of alienation and recovery, an influence we can see in critical approaches to many challenges of contemporary life, including the experience of the inequalities of economic life, sexuality, gender, race, colonialism, and so on. As I discussed in the Introduction, Deleuze reads Stirner's appropriation of the dialectic as that which took it to its nihilistic and egoistic end. However, it is Feuerbachian humanism that so heavily influenced the early Marx and that continues to exert such continued influence today.²⁷ We see this in the identification of the Marxist project and much of critical thought in general with Marx's early work, particularly the 1844 Manuscripts, where Marx lays out most strongly and compellingly his analysis of the alienating effects of capital. The predominance of this focus is evident not only in the logic of many critical projects, but also in the frequency of the appearance of 1844 Manuscripts on syllabi for courses in critical thought. That is, we tend to teach and read Marx through the lens of the 1844 Manuscripts and the framework of alienation and recovery.²⁸ Yet, this framework was exactly what was at stake in the humanism debates amongst Marxist scholars and communists parties in the early- to mid-twentieth centuries. And, as Althusser insists, Marx himself broke from this problematic by 1845.

²⁷ Marx, too, saw himself breaking not only from Feuerbach, but also Bruno Bauer, and Max Stirner—"a triumvirate of Marx's own making," as Terrell Carver puts it (1998: 214).

²⁸ Sam Chambers alerted me to the issue of how Marx is taught through his unpublished manuscript, "Society, Social Formations: Reading the *1857 Introduction*."

To trace these logics and their continuing effects requires starting with Feuerbach's own account of the alienation of religion (particularly Christianity) and the means for overcoming it. Feuerbach's appropriation of the Hegelian logic of dialectics, particularly as a recovery of an alienated essence, provided Marx with an analogical base for his initial critique of capitalist labor. In his *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach develops a critique of Christianity that was highly regarded not only as a refutation of religion, but also as a refutation of Hegelian idealism in favor of a materialist application of Hegel's dialectic. Feuerbach inverts the Hegelian logic. If, for Hegel, the dialectic of history is aimed at the recovery of Absolute Spirit through the realization of self-consciousness and -alienation through human history and action, for Feuerbach, alienation is not the product of the alienation of spirit/consciousness onto the objective world, but the result of the human projection of its own nature outward onto God/the divine (1957 [1881]). Feuerbach, then, argues that the very characteristics that Christianity/religion associates with God—Reason, Will, Affection—are, in fact, the proper nature of humans. These characteristics, moreover, are indeed perfections (as when they are attributed to God) that are constitutive of who and what we are (1957 [1881]: 3). The problem is that humans do not first recognize these characteristics in themselves, but instead discover them already projected outward onto God. For Feuerbach, this projection is made possible by bringing together the infinite nature of human consciousness with the human recognition of mortality, which makes humans long for a personal God as the source of their

attributes/perfections. The human, thus, “projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject” (1957 [1881]: 29-30). Religious humans alienate themselves from themselves by projecting their essential nature onto the divine as the perfect realization of that nature and then by subjecting themselves to that objectified being—God (1957 [1881]: 31). For Feuerbach, then, humans become incapable of seeing within themselves the possibility of the perfection of the characteristics of Reason, Will, and Affection, and with these elements the realization of the species being of the human.

Importantly, Feuerbach’s criticism of religion and the problem of alienation takes the possibility of alienation as natural to the human, even if it is ultimately an obstacle to the realization of the species being. That is, following Hegel, Feuerbach argues that human consciousness (and, indeed, human being) is characterized by its ability to reflect on itself through a process of abstraction and objectification. As he writes, “Man is himself at once I and thou; he can put himself in the place of another, for this reason, that to him his species, his essential nature, and not merely his individuality is an object of thought”²⁹ (1957 [1881]: 2). On one hand, the human ability to objectify itself is for Feuerbach essential to the realization of the species-being, because it allows humans to develop science as the study of the species, wherein our essential nature becomes an object of thought (1957 [1881]: 2). On the other hand, this ability can lead us astray: because humans are able to abstract from

²⁹ Thus, Feuerbach participates in the modern phenomena of the “creation” of the human as an object of reflection that Foucault describes in his analysis of “Man and his Doubles” in *The Order of Things* (1994 [1970]).

the individual and see ourselves in the other (and because consciousness is infinite for Feuerbach), humans can also abstract from themselves to the thought of an infinite Other—God. Thus, the very characteristics of human consciousness that make it capable of overcoming alienation and of realizing its species being, also make such alienation possible in the first place. Overcoming alienation, then, requires the proper understanding and use of the characteristics and abilities of consciousness. The wish for immortality in cooperation with the infinite nature of consciousness drives the religious impulse, for to achieve the appropriate relation to consciousness and to the species being requires for Feuerbach the renunciation of the dream of immortality that accompanies the drive to religious objectification and, just as importantly, the acceptance of finitude.³⁰ To overcome the alienation of religion, humans must accept the finitude of the individual for the sake of the realization of the species being.³¹

This logic of alienation and recovery through the reorientation to an essential element of human nature is repeated in the logic of the new “mortalist” humanism. Take, for example, Stephen White’s approach to the question of finitude. White’s argues that the dominant contemporary figure of the subject—the willful, autonomous liberal subject that he calls a “capacious” subject—is limited insofar as it does not adequately account for “our subjection to mortality” and the experience of finitude

³⁰ For Feuerbach, the realization of the species being of humans cannot be achieved by the individual, but only in the infinite succession of bodies that makes up the life of the species being of humanity. Joan Copjec criticizes Feuerbach’s move away from the individual from a Lacanian perspective—for Copjec’s Lacanian influenced politics, the individual and its desire remain the central focus. See Chapter 1 of Copjec’s *Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (2002).

³¹ Thus, Feuerbach, even as a left Hegelian, participates in a kind of Kantian framework of limits. For Kant consciousness is not, of course, unlimited, but the realization of freedom and moral perfection requires an acceptance of the limits of finitude.

(2009: 51). Under the influence of this image of the subject, “capacious” subjects tend, then, both to overestimate the capacities of reason/will and to fail to develop White’s cardinal virtues of “presumptive generosity” and “capacious dignity.”³² The inability or unwillingness of capacious subjects to accept the limitations on agency and the will—as well as the limitations of natural systems and global capitalism—cause them to project an image of the human and the world that instead reflects perfected images of the traits that humans do possess, though in finite form. When this image of the capacious human is thwarted by the world of other people and things, people under the sway of this image are then prone to bouts of existential revenge, and even violence and exploitation. Thus, as for Feuerbach, the solution for White is acceptance of the condition of finitude, and the surrender of the dreams of a capacious subject; such acceptance makes it possible to develop the common characteristics of finite human subjects that for White are proper for the contemporary condition. As White explains, “In effect, we operatively forget one of the terms of our challenge: being consciously subject to death in a world without transcendent guarantees. To grapple adequately with this challenge, we need to embrace a response that is quietly and persistently effective in vivifying our sense of finitude” (2009: 67). So, as with Feuerbach, with White the very characteristic that most binds humans together—

³² White develops a concept of dignity that differs from the sort promoted by Michael Ignatieff’s concept of human dignity as a key component of human rights (see Ignatieff 2003). We could also add George Kateb as a contemporary liberal thinker who has continued to develop a vision of human dignity and a willful, capacious subject (Kateb 2011). Writing against this linking of dignity with agential capacity as part of vision of individuality, White argues, “Our capaciousness does indeed mean that we can master much in the world, but such projections always remain arrayed before a background of remaining inarticulacy. As *capacious*, we are always *captive* in this sense” (2009: 51).

finitude—can also become the trait that alienates humans from one another and from our own sense of mortality. For Feuerbach, the recognition of mortality can drive humans to locate the possibility of overcoming it in an image of the divine. With White, the willful subject seeks to avoid the acknowledgement of finitude by projecting a picture of human mastery. Whereas the willful capacious subject remains alienated in its avoidance of finitude and mortality, White's ideal subject operates with a clear sense of mortality in order to become less alienated from the world and from others. Again, my criticism of this orientation is not motivated by an attempt to deny the fact of mortality; rather, my concern lies with the effects of this turn to finitude for the project of politics, which I will develop in the next section. The fact of mortality is one thing; the repeated invocation of this fact as political, theoretical, and rhetorical strategy is quite another.

Like the new humanists, and even Feuerbach and the early Marx, I recognize the fundamental and multiple conditions of alienation (including alienation from our own mortality and finitude) that mark human existence and experience. Alienation is, I contend, a key and even constitutive element of the human condition. The "Feuerbach problem," as I am presenting it, is *not* the affirmation of alienation, when in fact we are not alienated. To take such a position would deny the constitutive fact of alienation. Instead, the *problem* is located in the construction of a dialectic of alienation and reappropriation whereby affirming the ontological fact of our alienation would serve to resolve that alienation, as if the only way to negotiate alienation would be to embrace

it. I am arguing, instead, that while we are alienated, the way to deal with our alienation is not simply to re-articulate and become more attuned to the fact of our various alienations, nor to presume that the answer to alienation will be found in its overcoming or in a recovery of the fully human, the unalienated human. I am trying to show that the fully human *is* the alienated human. A politics of the human must therefore work without a framework of recovery from alienation, yet without giving up on the possibility or hope that these conditions of alienation might be ameliorated by changing social and political conditions. As such, a politics of the human must often look to the limits of the conditions of alienation—where death is more imminent, where the distance is greater between labor and its profits, where bodies and practices fall far from norms of recognition, where failure is far more real than success—not in order to find the “truth” of the human condition and the indomitable “human spirit” nor to confirm the abuses of state, capital, and heteronorms, but instead to find there the possibilities of life and action in spite of, and against, the force of all of these alienations and abuses.

Breaking with Feuerbach

If my analysis were to end with the comparison to Feuerbach, it would provide only an interesting point of comparison/analysis for the new humanist turn to finitude and the project of alienation and recovery. However, the Feuerbach legacy is not just a part the intellectual history of critical thought that has been left behind. Instead, it

remains deeply embedded in the logic of critical thought as inherited through the Marxian tradition. Many “new humanists” and critical theorists may, of course, insist that they have nothing to do with the Marxist tradition. Be that as it may, my point in making this connection is to show that regardless of one’s direct connection to the Marxist tradition, the dialectic of alienation and recovery that was “naturalized,” so to speak, through Marx’s appropriation in his early work of Feuerbach remains a dominant paradigm for contemporary thought and analyses of life and politics in late state capitalism. Feuerbach’s inversion of the Hegelian dialectic as a move toward a certain materialism inspired and enabled Marx to make his famous argument concerning the alienating effects of capitalism, an argument that would become one of the most compelling and enduring criticisms of capitalism in the Marxist tradition, particularly in the late 20th-century.³³ For Marx, Feuerbach’s critique of religion was revolutionary for the Hegelian project because it provided a material frame for dialectics and for the analysis of alienation. The young Marx took up the Feuerbachian framework as a material version of the Hegelian dialectic, one that could be put to work to describe the alienating character of capitalist mode of production: humans are

³³ In his work on the reception of Marx and the development of the Marxian tradition, Terrell Carver has worked to show how many of the key texts attributed to Marx were actually constructions from his notebooks, as in the case of the “1844 Manuscripts,” or from Engels’ attempt to establish a kind of orthodox reading of Marx, as in the case of *The German Ideology* (see Carver 2010 and Carver 2011). The implication of Carver’s textual analysis of the “1844 Manuscripts,” while tremendously important for how scholars might reexamine the reception of Marx, does little to affect the point of my argument (and Althusser’s argument) here. For Althusser, like his contemporaries, at the time had no way of knowing that the “1844 Manuscripts” were largely a construction. Further, Althusser’s point about how to read Marx holds insofar as one accepts that Althusser recognized that the humanist, Feuerbachian orientation of the “1844 Manuscripts” were methodologically and politically distinguishable from Marx’s later work.

alienated from their labor, other humans, and their species being through the alienating effects of commodification (1978a [1844]). In the debates over the stakes and legacy of Marxism of the 20th-century, this reading of Feuerbach becomes the touchstone for the explication of a humanist Marxism.

For the early Marx, the Feuerbachian criticism of the idealism of Hegel and his reappropriation of the dialectic of alienation and recovery provided a framework both for describing the existential experience of alienation under capitalism and, just as importantly, for explaining the deficiencies of theories of political economy. The 1844 Manuscripts are just as much a refutation of the method of political economists as they are an analysis of the alienating effects of capitalism. The Feuerbachian framework provides Marx a way of grounding Hegelianism as well as a basis for criticizing the problems of political economy—in particular, their abstractions and lack of historical sense (cf. 1978 [1884]: 70-71). For Marx, just as the Hegelian dialectic (particularly when imbued with a theological character) remains abstracted from the material conditions of existence, so too the methods of political economy are abstracted from the material conditions of capital: “Political economy proceeds from the fact of private property, but it does not explain it to us. It expresses in general, abstract formulae the *material* process through which private property actually passes, and these formulae it then takes for *laws* (1978 [1884]: 70, emphasis in original). In order to return to the “actual economic fact” (rather than to the abstract), Marx turns to the Feuerbachian framework of the dialectic as a device for explaining the worker’s

alienation from his labor and all of the attendant effects of that alienation.³⁴ Marx makes this argument by precisely repeating Feuerbach's criticism of religion: "It is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts his life into God, the less he retains in himself" (1978 [1884]: 72).

In response to both the abstractions of political economy and to the existential alienation of the worker under capitalism, Marx employs the prime tool of dialectical critique, namely, critical unmasking (or demystification).³⁵ As for political economy, he argues that by abstracting from the "direct relationship between the worker (labour) and production" political economy "conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labour" (1978 [1884]: 73). Marx, then, sees his intervention into political economy here as an initial attempt to uncover this condition of estrangement (much like the new humanists seek to uncover the fact of vulnerability and finitude supposedly hidden under the image of the willful subject or behind state practices) in order that these conditions might be overcome. Thus, Marx finds in the idea of communism the overcoming both of private property and of alienation:

Communism as the positive transcendence of private property, or human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of

³⁴ I use the masculine pronoun here to capture Marx's language concerning the worker. In the contemporary context, I would refer to the worker as she or he.

³⁵ These practices of unmasking and demystification have taken heavy criticism in recent critical work, and I take up this discussion in Chapter 5. See also Bruno Latour (2004), Eve Sedgwick (2003), Jane Bennett (2010), Jacques Rancière (2010), and Samuel Chambers (2013).

man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being...This communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully-developed humanism equals naturalism; its is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man. (1978 [1884]: 82)

On one hand, this statement is a remarkable completion of the (Feuerbachian) dialectic of alienation and reappropriation in which alienation is finally overcome and the the human is restored to itself through the material conditions of social and natural life. On the other, we can see here the kernel of what will lead Marx to break with Feuerbach, i.e., his focus on the social and material conditions of existence, which will eventually lead him away from what he ultimately sees as the idealism of the Feuerbachian dialectic as well.

Ultimately, Marx moves away from Feuerbach because he comes to see in Feuerbach the same kind of abstraction that he originally located in the political economists. Thus, in the “Theses on Feuerbach” Marx criticizes the “theoretical attitude” of Feuerbach's approach, which he argues abstracts from the social and material nature of human life, in the same way that political economy begins with the abstract concept of private property. And though Marx continues to accept Feuerbach's critique of religion, he finds the same primary problem in Feuerbach that he identifies in other materialisms: they begin in the abstract realm of consciousness/contemplation of objects and not in the practical world of “sensuous human activity” (2000b [1885]: 171). Marx argues that by beginning with “the fact of religious self-alienation” Feuerbach creates a false split between two worlds, “a religious world and a secular one,” which then must be resolved by the recovery of the

secular from the religious (2000b [1885]: 172). But Marx now sees in Feuerbach's analysis an approach that mirrors the problems of political economy, which overlooks the social relations that are constitutive of the terms of analysis in the first place. That is, Marx argues that Feuerbach's reading of religion and alienation requires him to posit the human essence as "an abstraction inherent in each single individual," which in turn leads him to read the human essence "only as a 'genus', as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals" (2000b [1885]: 172). For Marx, this abstraction causes Feuerbach to miss the fact that both the 'religious sentiment' and the abstract individual engaged in such a sentiment are social products (2000b [1845]: 173). So long as this fact is overlooked, alienation remains, for we continue to be separated from our true essence, which is not individuals in relation to civil society, but "social humanity" (2000b [1845]: 173). Marx now emphasizes that the human essence, as well as the concepts we use to investigate and explain the human, are from the beginning products of the "ensemble of social relations" (2000b [1845]: 172).

Thus, resolving the problems of an abstract versus concrete account of the human and its relation to social life is crucial for Marx's project because it determines how we might account for and overcome the alienating affects of religion, the state, capital, and private property. For example, in "The King of Prussia"—which as a text written in 1844 technically comes before the break with Feuerbach, already begins, I argue, to show Marx's growing unease with the Feuerbachian project—Marx argues

against a strong notion of the will as a driver of political change/revolution, which contradicts Feuerbach's notion of the will as an central aspect of the human essence and its ability to overcome the alienating effects of religion. Marx's central argument in this text is that the state cannot effectively overcome social problems both because it remains too deeply bound up in the perpetuation of these problems themselves and because the notion of state invention depends upon an abstract notion of the state and civil society and of the human will. In order to make this argument, Marx points to two central problems with the notion that the state can solve social problems. First, such a view depends on a notion of "political intelligence" that is seen as a necessary precursor to effective political intervention into society, which would be carried out primarily through "administrative acts" (2000a [1885]: 134). Marx correlates the strength of the state with the degree of political intelligence—that is, of thinking "inside the limits of politics"—present within a state apparatus. "The principle of politics," as he writes, "is the will." Greater political intelligence, thus, correlates with a belief "in the omnipotence of the will" (2000a [1884]: 135). For Marx, this belief overlooks "the natural and intellectual limits of the will" and, thereby, misses the "sources of social evils" (2000a [1884]: 135).

The idea, then, of political intelligence props up a strong notion of the will that actually leads us away from social problems because it both begins with the abstract, not the concrete, individual and fails to see the socially constructed nature of the will. That is, contra Feuerbach's vision of the perfection of the will, Marx reads the will as

necessarily produced and limited by material (social and economic) constraints.

Second, Marx argues that the idea of the state itself is an abstracted whole developed from the ideal of a common human essence. Thus, an understanding of the state or any concept of the human must always begin not with the abstract whole, but with the single, concrete, real individual (and not the realm of “civil society”). This logic of the state and its relation to the will, then, reflects Feuerbach's critique of religion and Marx's response to it. Like the state, humans under the influence of the religious sentiment fail to see the source of the condition in which they find themselves within themselves and instead project it outward. Yet, whereas Feuerbach's response is to abolish God and turn to faith in the infinite consciousness of the human capable of contemplating the species being, Marx acknowledges the socially- and historically-constructed nature of the individual and its will and seeks to locate the solution to the alienations of the state and capital in the realization of the social nature of humans. Feuerbach's “solution” for alienation remains bound up in the logic that also makes possible the separate concepts of the state and civil society possible, for both remain an “abstract whole,” separated from the social relations constitutive of the single, concrete individual.³⁶

³⁶ It strikes me as a bit odd that Marx, in his criticism of Feuerbach, cites Feuerbach's division of individual consciousness and civil society, while he too turns to a kind of dualism between the consciousness of humans and the material conditions of their life. For though Marx seems right to draw limits upon the human will that Feuerbach does not embrace, placing the “definite relations” of economic relations independent of human will seems to undermine our ability to play any active role in the overcoming of alienation in the first place. What is compelling for me about both of their projects (on this short reading) is that both of them seek to criticize a current view of human nature in order to enact a positive program for overcoming it. But we find in Feuerbach an overconfidence in the power of

Again, Marx's critique of the Feuerbach problem applies to the new humanism as articulated in a project like White's today. That is, the condition of finitude in which White grounds his ethical approach to politics itself remains abstracted from the concrete conditions that give rise to the experience of finitude in the first place. As scholars across disciplines have pointed out, the exposure to and experience of mortality remain unequally distributed across geographical, racial, class, gender, and sexual lines. Finitude is, indeed, a fundamental fact of life, but it is, likewise, a socially- and historically-mediated one.³⁷ White's recognition of finitude and mortality remains an ethical preparation for politics, instead of the engagement in the practice of politics itself.³⁸ Indeed, this ethical orientation can be read as an abstraction from the concrete engagement with politics. As such, White places too much faith in this ethical orientation toward the universal fact of finitude as adequate to the project of ameliorating conditions of existential revenge and exploitation in political and social life. As Jason Frank suggests, "The 'tempered agonism' that White advocates is settled within the assumed space of an updated humanism...rather than being pulled in the direction of political contests over the meaning of that very designation" (2010: 671). A politics of the human, as I am developing here, requires resisting the move to deal with our conditions of alienation through the turn to an abstracted essence of human

human consciousness to direct itself toward its best ends and in Marx an overconfidence in the power of material relations to drive social change.

³⁷ Thus, Honig can write in a spirit that parallels Marx's criticism of Feuerbach, "In other words, the vivification White recommends may be a product, rather than a precondition, of political engagement" (2010b: 425).

³⁸ Judith Butler's approach to the problem of vulnerability comes much closer to capturing this social dimension of mortality, but as I argue in Chapter 2, it too gets dragged down by an abstract image of the human.

life. It may also require, as I will suggest through a brief turn to Althusser, resisting (more than Marx) the drive to overcome alienation in the first place, for such an overcoming appears more and more to be itself an abstraction from the contestations of politics and of the struggles of life. Existence itself is marked by ineliminable experiences of alienation that are socially and historically mediated. If “the human” is to remain anything but an abstraction, then we must look to concrete expressions of and claims to be human in order to see what the human might be and what it might become.

Althusser’s “anti-humanism” and the critique of liberalism

Through a return to Marx’s debt to and break from Feuerbach I have begun to show how the Feuerbach problem manifests itself in the contemporary new humanism. Turning now to Althusser’s analysis of (and insistence upon the importance of) this break extends my argument to the problems of the dialectic of alienation and recovery in contemporary politics. In turning to these “anti-humanist” arguments, however, it is important to note that Althusser certainly never gave up a concern for human individuals in the struggle against alienation and repression. Althusser never disavows a concern for the conditions of human lives, he only rejects the foregrounding of the individual subject in such a way that it obscures other objects of study—in particular, the conditions of subjectivity and alienation/repression/domination themselves.³⁹ Thus,

³⁹ Steven B. Smith offers this typical misreading of the anti-humanist tone of Althusser’s early work. Smith argues that Althusser’s structuralism completely abolishes the individual subject, and along with it

he eschews the humanist drive to overcome these forces (carried out by a return to a common human essence) in favor of a less abstracted account of these conditions. Indeed, Althusser finds in Marx the impetus for “a task for creating a new philosophy that does not unify under an oppressive ideological unity,” but instead creates “ideological conditions for the liberation and free development of social practices” (1990 [1976]: 265).

The key distinction here is that the anti-humanist approach investigates “structural” elements of social, discursive, and economic formations in order to understand their functioning and illuminate that which might escape them. In other words, “anti-humanists” like Althusser investigate these conditions not to provide a totalizing view of the subject and its conditions, but to point to ways that the human subject can exist alongside and perhaps in opposition to these conditions. Yet, in so doing, they still recognize that the various forms of human life are through and through products of their conditions and that these forms of life will always be conditioned by various limits to human life, including the materiality of economic orders, social norms, ideologies, and limits to the life of the human body in general.⁴⁰ Therefore, Althusser and other anti-humanists offer no promise of escape from all conditions of

agency, autonomy, etc. Further, Smith argues that this anti-humanism that was characteristic of a strain of French thought in the late 20th-century was a product of the influence of Nietzsche. That Smith’s reading depends on what I see as a flawed reading of Nietzsche is evident in my reading of Nietzsche and Deleuze in the Introduction. See Smith (1984).

⁴⁰ I admit that one need not take an “anti-humanist” position in order to affirm a conditioned and finite image of the human. In fact, the phrase “anti-humanism” now appears inapt for both theory and politics. I take up this language more as a artifact of late 20th-century theory. Insofar as I employ an anti-humanist reading here through Althusser, I see it as a theoretical tool, and not a political project of giving up on individual human beings.

power, exploitation, or alienation.⁴¹ To that end, Althusser criticized what he called the “theoretical humanism” of Marxist theorists who argued for the primacy of the theme of alienation and the humanist Feuerbachian framework for understanding Marx’s work and the possibilities for overcoming capitalism.

Against this position, Althusser advanced a “theoretical anti-humanism” that was predicated on a reading of Marx that insisted upon an epistemological break between Marx’s early work, which Althusser reads as primarily humanist and ideological, and Marx’s later work, in which according to Althusser, Marx develops a proper science of the study of capital. Though it is beyond the scope of this project to explicate the science/ideology distinction, it does seem necessary to note that in the context of the disciplinary and political battles over Marx and his legacy in the French Communist Party, Althusser’s reading of Marx does appear as an attempt to establish a new Marxist orthodoxy. Indeed, the structural elements of Althusser’s thought may be overplayed at times, even by Althusser himself and certainly by the strain of Althusserian Marxism that developed in the 1970’s. However, his “anti-humanist” reading of Marx is never carried out for the sake of giving up on the individual and the possibilities for a more liberated experience of life. Thus, whatever the problems and dogmatism of Althusser’s structuralism and science/ideology distinction, the underlying argument remains important insofar as it is a *political*, and not just epistemological,

⁴¹ Interestingly, Butler criticizes Althusser in her *Psychic Life of Power* for providing no “enlightened escape from ideology” (1997:110). Though she generally takes a Foucaultian line in reading the conditions of subjectivity as always conditioned by lines of power, she likewise continually posits a longing for a state of subjectivity beyond these conditions. I will take up these issues again in Chapter 3.

problem. That is, for Althusser, if Marx had remained a Feuerbachian humanist, then his work would remain caught up in the “ideology”⁴² of the individual, autonomous human, a position that Marx himself sought to overcome in his break from Feuerbach. Althusser insists, then, on Marx’s break from Feuerbach as necessary for the Marxian project to overcome the abstractions of the humanist mode and to address the concrete contemporary conjuncture. As Althusser claims, “Marx’s anti-humanism comes from a refusal of an originating subject in favor of production relations, class struggle, and ideological relations” (1976 [1975]: 206).

Thus, Althusser’s commitment to an anti-humanism position is both methodological and political. Politically, he was concerned that the humanist reading of Marx that develops out of the *1844 Manuscripts* leads to a traditionally liberal (or bourgeois) model of the subject in which the subject could be restored to the conditions of autonomous self-determination if and when the alienating conditions of capitalism were removed (as with Feuerbach’s vision of overcoming the alienating effects of religion). For Althusser, this reading of the alienations of capitalism remains too focused on the isolated individual. He cites Marx’s Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach to highlight Marx’s own break from this position: “The essence of Man is no *abstraction* inherent in the isolated *individual*. In its reality, it is *the ensemble of social relations*” (Althusser 2003 [1967]: 253, emphasis in original). For Althusser, the analysis of

⁴² To use the term “ideology” here in reference to Althusser’s work is tricky. While he argues for a break between ideology and science in Marx’s work, in his ISA’s essay, Althusser develops a much more complex notion of ideology that functions itself as an ineliminable fact through which human experience is mediated.

capitalism cannot be a question of the individual, but of a theory of society (2003 [1967]: 254). Thus, Althusser reads Marx as an anti-humanist in the sense that Marx's analysis "begins not with man, but with a given economy (infrastructure), which is a relation (1976 [1975]: 199-200).⁴³ Therefore, methodologically, Althusser argued that the significance of Marx's work is that it begins to explain economic and social conditions not from the capacities of the human subject, but from precisely the reverse: a study of economic and social conditions will make possible an understanding of the human subject.

Althusser's notion of the primacy of the economic in the last instance marks an attempt to determine the possibilities of life and the capacities of the human based upon the "structure" that produces and conditions it. To put things another way, the point for Althusser was to get to a theory of a process of capitalism and its subjects without a central, intentional subject driving it. Thus, Althusser's criticism of humanist socialism is not that there is a concept of freedom from economic exploitation, but that the project focused on individual development and the idea of the human "becoming by himself what he is" (2005 [1965]: 238). The problem then is not with the goals but with conceptualization. In the terms of the debate as I am highlighting them here, we can see that just as Marx pointed out in "The King of Prussia" the insufficiency of solving problems of the state through the accumulation of political intelligence, for

⁴³ Althusser's use of the word "economy" is tricky, too, but for a different set of reasons. As Timothy Mitchell has recently argued, "the economy is a recent product of socio- technical practice, including the practice of academic economics. Previously, the term "economy" referred to ways of managing resources and exercising power. In the mid-twentieth century, it became an object of power and knowledge" (2008: 2).

Althusser a socialism that begins with a given human subject and its essence is insufficient because it misses the socially and historically conditioned nature of that essence. For Althusser, the highlighting of this historically, economically, and socially conditioned nature is the significance of Marx's break — a shift from the essence of man and a recovery from alienation to a focus on the social as the conditions for understanding the "essence" of man in the first place. Thus, the subject and its consciousness come to be seen as products of the "ideological" conditions of the social and economic whole.

In many ways, this argument could be read as a version of a standard social constructivist account of the (human) subject. But my return to Althusser and the Feuerbach problem is not done in the name of simple, so-called constructivism. Instead, my point here in elaborating this aspect of Althusser's reading of Marx is show that Althusser makes it possible to see how the Feuerbach problem of alienation and recovery continues to haunt the contemporary ethical turn. For Althusser, so long as Marx remained within the Feuerbachian framework of alienation, then the problems of State capitalism could be characterized in a series of (primarily bourgeois) dichotomies—species being v. alienated man, reason v. unreason, commune v. State, freedom v. unfreedom, human v. inhuman—that could be resolved through recovery of the latter to the former (Althusser 2005 [1965]: 225-226). Further, Althusser argues that the appearance of these contradictions gives the (false) appearance that they are now ready to remedied: "Feuerbach's humanism made it possible to think just this

contradiction by showing in unreason the alienation of reason, and in this alienation the history of man, that is, his realization" (2005 [1965]: 225).⁴⁴ Thus, for Althusser the political task and the ideology of the human that emerges from the Feuerbachian analysis cannot escape the dilemmas of bourgeois liberalism that it attempts to evade.⁴⁵ Under this rubric, the task of politics becomes the act of recovery instead of the critique of a given social order. As Althusser writes, "This new theory of man is the basis for a new type of political action: the politics of *practical* reappropriation...Politics is no longer simply theoretical criticism...but man's practical reappropriation of his essence" (2005 [1965]: 226). As a practical activity, this humanist politics seems to be the kind of politics that Marx *appears* to advocate in his Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (2000b [1885]: 173). But as Althusser argues (and Marx realized) to remain focused on a human essence in this drive to change the world represents "a will...a hope or nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (2005 [1965]: 233).⁴⁶ As such, this project would remain primarily an attempt to restore or to actualize a predetermined concept of the human essence and the political community

⁴⁴ Further, for Althusser following Marx in "The German Ideology," this turn to human nature carries with it a "concealed" value judgment: "the couple human/inhuman" (2001[1969]: 236). And as Marx writes, "The 'inhuman' as much as the 'human' is a product of present conditions; it is their negative side" (in Althusser 2001[1969]: 237).

⁴⁵ Althusser goes so far as to write, "All humanists are liberals" (2003 [1967]: 223). The rhetoric of this statement is obviously over the top, but it makes a striking point. Althusser sees no way to develop a politics sufficient for taking on the problems of capitalism through the project of a liberal humanism.

⁴⁶ We can see here a resonance with the Lacanian critique of fantasy. Althusser, though never a proper Lacanian himself, was significantly influenced by Lacan, particularly in the development of the notion of interpellation (see Montag 2013: Chapter 7). For Althusser, all political projects that are rooted primarily in ideological frameworks are at risk of this attachment to hope or nostalgia. This reading of ideology becomes more problematic in light of Althusser's later work on ideology in which he argues that there is never any escape from ideology.

proper to it. Althusser insists on the shift from ideology to science in Marx's break with Feuerbach as a break with the political and epistemological problems of the liberal ideology of humanism and its logic of alienation and recovery. Only with this break, Althusser insists, can the Marxist project come to produce a theory of the social whole sufficient for overcoming the repressive aspects of capitalism and bourgeois liberalism.

To return to White's project, we can see that it remains bound up with a similar problematic as that which Marx battled with the bourgeois liberal subject, even as White attempts to overcome it. In fact, White returns to both Locke and Hobbes in order to chasten the contemporary willful liberal subject, which he argues has lost sight of the importance of a recognition of mortality. White argues that both Locke's and Hobbes's theories employ the fact of mortality as a "range value...which provides restraints or a disposition that connects one human to another" (2011: 65). But in turning to these classical state of nature theorists, White has to pull off a difficult feat: affirm their recognition of shared human finitude without being captured by their ideologies which lead to the very model of citizens and subjects that White wishes to avoid. White's argument trades on the assumption that the contemporary liberal subject (particularly the non-theist) is not attuned to, and in fact actively avoids, the figure of mortality. In fact, White argues that "orienting the ontological figure of human being more around its subjection to mortality is likely to be perceived by nontheistic liberals as a deeply threatening gesture" (2011: 64-65). Underlying this claim is the presumption that a certain kind of secular liberal subject has turned away from the

problem of mortality primarily because of the association of the mortality with the vision of the suffering sinner in religious practice (cf. 2011: 64). The first problem with such a framework is that it leaves one wondering who exactly these liberals are who have turned away from mortality because of the problems of religion. This claim in itself seems to be precisely the kind of abstraction that both Marx and Althusser warned about in their diagnosis of the Feuerbach problem. Second, and more importantly, the abstraction required to make this case calls into question the possibility of grounding politics and ethics in a common human experience without falling into the traps of the state of nature stories in the first place.⁴⁷

White, then, attempts to draw out of both Locke's and Hobbes's states of nature an attention to mortality without the aftereffects of a move toward a willful, sovereign subject. For example, White takes the Hobbesian state of nature to be an important reminder of mortality, one that can be refigured "not as a violent death which we can equally threaten each other but rather simply as the death to which we are all inescapably subject" (2011: 64). Thus, Hobbes's war of all against all becomes an ethical field for recognition of our common mortality. White does, however, acknowledge that Locke's portrayal of our finitude may provide a better basis for this ethical development. As he suggests, "Without a range value like Locke's which provides restraints or a disposition that connects one human to another, the default disposition of the claiming, capacious agent is one that orients it to the world as a

⁴⁷ Here Marx's criticism of the "Robinson Crusoe" individual of liberal politics and political economy seems apt. See, in particular, Marx's "'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*" (2008 [1857]).

material to be managed or guarded against” (2011: 65). White, we see, wants us to dwell longer with the ontology and experience of mortality in order to get a greater sense of our non-sovereignty and to develop an attitude of gratitude and dignity. But White’s attempt to rescue this ethical impulse from these state of nature stories simply does not work. First, White’s account abstracts from already abstract stories in order to find morality tales in these rhetorical devices that were originally written not to chasten us, but to justify private property and colonialism (Locke) and authoritarian rule (Hobbes). Further, in order to transform the classical state of nature story into a field for ethical development, White must leave out their violence, whose ever-present threat drives the recognition of mortality in these stories in the first place. For if the reality of violence is to be admitted—that is, if such a theory were to be concrete, rather than abstract—then it would have to recognize, again, that the vulnerability to violence and painful death is socially mediated and unequally distributed.

It is not that White does not recognize this problem. In fact, he attempts to distinguish his focus on mortality as a universal condition from a focus on vulnerability, which he sees as more open to the criticism of unequal distribution (2011: 69-71). Ultimately, White tries to escape the perils of what I am calling the Feuerbach problem here by eschewing the claim that mortality may have a common essence for all humans: “There is no plausible way to deny this cultural and historical variability in the meaning of death. But the force of my argument does not actually depend on such a denial. I am not contending that mortality has a single, universal

significance for all places and times. All I want to assert is that a vivified consciousness of mortality in late-modern Western democracies can have the sort of effect on ethical awareness that I have sketched" (2011: 72). By the time he has reached this last line, White has reduced the question of mortality down to a thin abstraction that seem ill-equipped to take on the realities of these late modern social formations.

In order to fend off the charge of abstraction and to avoid the problematic of alienation and recovery White has to reduce the weight of his assertions to a thin concept of mortality that promotes a greater ethical awareness. Moreover, a project like White's faces two more important challenges. First, just as Leo Bersani criticizes the assumption that a shared sexual orientation will somehow unite people around a common progressive politics, we might ask whether a common recognition of mortality would motivate such ethical responsiveness. Second, and relatedly, it is an open question whether contemporary liberals actually neglect the problem of mortality in their response to politics and their experiences of subjectivity. In returning to the state of nature stories, White reminds us that the threat of violence and death has always been at the root of liberal politics. Indeed, in his own recognition that "the default disposition of the claiming, capacious agent is one that orients it to the world as a material to be managed or guarded against," White is acknowledging that the threat of mortality can just as easily lead us to guard against the world of others, rather than engage it generously. White calls upon Locke's "range value" as a check against this possibility, but in so doing he deviates from Locke's own story in which we elect a

common judge to manage the perils of life together and to help us guard against the premature realization of mortality. Take the recent gun debates in the U.S., for example. One could read the fight against gun control and the insistence on the right to bear (any and all) arms as one expression of existential resentment against perceived threats to individual sovereignty. It might be. But it is also a clear response to the realization of human mortality and an attempt to deal with that fact. In the NRA's rhetoric the gun becomes the figure of a new common judge: if everyone had one, then we would all be safe from one another. A similar argument can be made about the war on terrorism and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as responses to 9/11 and the reality of terrorism. Here the ideology of democracy becomes the element that promises to protect us from one another – and especially from “Others.” In challenging White here, I am trying to show that the drive to a common orientation or essence for politics, even one of a shared fact of life leads just as easily to the opposite of White's hopes, and that it too readily repeats the humanist problematic of alienation and recovery.

Alienation without Recovery

From the “humanist controversy”⁴⁸ of twentieth-century Marxism, Althusser offered a rather stark solution to this enduring problem of humanism: “The absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its

⁴⁸ See Althusser's *The Humanist Controversy*, which has been recently translated and published in the United States (2003[1967]).

practical transformation. It is impossible to *know* anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes” (2005 1965: 229). Althusser was not alone in this conclusion. Foucault, likewise, called for a destruction of the “anthropological frame” as the only way for us to overcome the the problems of the modern humanism⁴⁹ (1994 [1970]: 342). The trouble with these responses is that they remain primarily at the level of epistemology. Though I have largely followed Althusser’s criticism of the Feuerbach problem, I do take some distance from his proposed “solution” through the focus on the epistemological break in Marx. In the same way that we find in Feuerbach (and the early Marx) an overconfidence in the power of the human to overcome alienation and to direct itself toward its best ends, we find in Althusser an overconfidence in the scientific break from ideology to provide an escape from the framework of humanism and alienation. As I indicated earlier, Althusser’s insistence on “the break” tends to become its own form of dogmatism – a dogmatism of the same sort that Althusser attempts to displace with his criticism of humanist Marxism.⁵⁰ The power of Althusser’s critique lies not only in its diagnosis of the political and methodological problems of a humanist critique, but also in its recognition of the lure of the humanist position. That is, the humanist theme provides a powerful, and often, compelling account of a shared

⁴⁹ Importantly, Foucault sees the focus on finitude as a contributor to this humanist frame, rather than as a cure for it. Foucault discusses this point in “Man and his Doubles” in *The Order of Things* (1994 [1970]).

⁵⁰ I tend to be somewhat generous to Althusser on this point, however, because insistence on this break carried for him a particular import in the political battles of the French Communist Party and the direction of anti-capitalist critique. Further, being a generation or more removed from the battles over structuralism perhaps allows me to return to these texts in a different light from their context in the disciplinary battles of the 1960’s-70’s.

human condition, a commonality which promises to drive progressive political attitudes and projects.

Responding to the problems of alienation, then, requires an acknowledgment that forms of alienation are multiple, and they are historically and socially produced and mediated. To turn to any one point of reference—even the undeniable fact of mortality—puts us on the path of a politics of recovery or reappropriation. Here Connolly's advice to attempt to transfigure some forms of alienation seems apt. But to fully come to terms with "the Feuerbach problem" it is also important to acknowledge that some forms of alienation may resist transfiguration. That is, the conditions of late modern life require us to be attentive to forms of life that persist (and perhaps even thrive) in spite of often intransigent forms of alienation. Such a position is difficult to embrace, since the traditions of both liberal political thought and "humanist" critical theory have promised liberation from alienation as the end game of politics.

Liberalism, it appears, will always want to solve the problem of alienation. The non-liberal response that I have tried to develop here refuses to give a solution, but rather to think alienation otherwise. Honig, in her own diagnosis of and response to the new mortalist humanism, presents an alternative to the focus on mortality and to the possible liberation from alienation that moves in the direction of giving up on answer to it. Drawing on Rancière, she calls for an agonistic humanism that might activate both the agonistic and receptive aspects of political life, or in her words, one that "works the intervals...between word and cry, natality and mortality, equality and

singularity, and between human and animal” (2010: 22). To work the intervals is to remain alienated in various ways and to varying degrees, which is where we are most of the time anyway. It is to remain unmoored to one aspect or another of human life as central for political and ethical life. There are certainly times when various aspects of personal, political, and ethical life solidify on one side of an interval or the other. And, as the persistence of the Feuerbach problem suggests, there may always be a tendency to find in such moments either a common human essence or our alienation from it. The task that Marx and Althusser set before critical thought, though, is to resist this tendency in order to explore the multiplicity of lines that unite or divide us in any given social order.

The Politics of Mattering

The language of the human and of dehumanization has become in recent years the dominant frame for accounting for and criticizing a wide range of abuses and social harms: from indefinite detention to the torture of “enemy combatants” to the indiscriminate use of drone attacks. Judith Butler’s recent work on the concept of “grievability” has contributed to this discussion by providing both an important analysis of the conditions that we call “human,” and the promise of an ethical grounding for politics. As with the work of other theorists associated with the “new humanist” focus on finitude, Butler’s “ethical turn” toward the precariousness, vulnerability, and grievability of life has been simultaneously praised for its perspicacity as an analysis of current state practices and condemned for depoliticizing these conflicts in favor of the assertion of a common ground for ethical action.⁵¹

Though I generally accept the criticisms of this ethical turn as a depoliticizing move in Butler’s work and as a shift away from the political possibilities of her still radical theory of performativity, in this chapter I focus instead on the role of the human in Butler’s work in order to highlight how “the human” functions in her work and in the broader

⁵¹ This criticism of the role of vulnerability in Butler’s work is not exactly new. The weight of the role of wounding, mourning, and melancholy on her theories of the subject and of agency has long been criticized, even by her most sympathetic readers. It has been variously criticized for dragging down the creative potential of performativity (Adam Phillips in Butler 1997a), for contributing to a overly dramatic and individualized concept of performativity (Sedgwick 2003), for reifying the dichotomy between subversion and subjection in her models of agency and subjectivity (Mahmood 2004), and, now most recently, for contributing to a “new humanism” as part of the ongoing ethical turn in political theory and philosophy (Honig 2010). In a different mode, David Mclvor (2012) suggests a reorientation of the politics of mourning by moving from Butler’s Freudian-inspired project to a Kleinian approach to mourning.

discourse of human rights, both of which underline the persistence of the dialectic of alienation and reappropriation in contemporary political and ethical thought.

Butler's use of "the human," I argue, is particularly illuminating for this discussion, since we find in Butler two distinct and conflicting images of the human, one of which begins to move outside a politics of recognition and recovery, the other of which remains caught in the dilemmas of the dialectic. First, Butler, especially in her recent work on the "grievability" and precariousness of human life, develops an image of the human as a kind of subject position or status that might offer protection from state and social violence. With this image, Butler participates in the now-familiar discourse that presents the victims of violence, oppression, or the denial of human rights as inhabiting a space in which they are rendered inhuman, invisible, spectral, or derealized. Here I argue that this discourse produces more problems than it solves because it overstates the power of the category of "the human" to protect us from violence and injustice; it attributes to the human a power it cannot wield. Further, it overlooks, and thus undervalues, the agency and worth of lives that fall outside the category of "the human" by beginning with an image of the human that has been developed by people in relative positions of privilege (theorists, politicians, and the like).

But Butler also presents a second image of the human as a dynamic category or experience that is always in the flux of contestation and subversion, an image that begins to get outside the politics of recognition and recovery. This use of the human

comes closer to realizing the potential of Butler's own notion of performativity insofar as it conceives the human as the effect of a set of practices and not as a subject position that can be determined in advance. To illuminate the consequences of these two images of the human I take up responses to the AIDS epidemic and the way that the "humanness" of its victims has been portrayed in critical accounts of the epidemic. Instead of focusing on the potential grievability of these victims as necessary for their coming to matter in the public arena, I suggest that their lives, and their forms of life, mark a devious, dangerous expression of the human, one that matters intensely as a potential disruption of normative orders of sexuality and kinship. Further, I draw from Frederick Douglass's self-description of the experience of the black slave alongside a contemporary Zimbabwean women's movement to argue for a politics of the human that aims to highlight those moments where the human is contested in expressions of desire and agency in spite of attempts to stifle it or even snuff it out.

Two Regimes of the Human

Carrying out this task of tracing "the human" in Butler's work is perhaps more complex than it would seem, for the figure of the human plays an important, but deeply ambiguous, role throughout her work. This ambiguity is clearly demonstrated in *Precarious Life*, a text that, Butler asserts, begins and ends with "the question of the human" (2006b [2004]: 20). As she writes, "We start here not because there is a human condition that is universally shared—this is surely *not yet* the case (2006b

[2004]: 20, emphasis added). The central questions of this text are, as Butler puts them, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life?*” (2006b [2004]: 20, emphasis in original). Implied in the *not yet* of a universal human condition, it seems to me, is the wish for or fantasy of such a condition, one that presumably depends on the universal grievability of all (human) lives. This appeal to universality may strike readers of Butler as strange given her own criticisms of universality (2000), her advocacy of William Connolly’s concept of pluralization in her most recent work (2012), and, perhaps most starkly, her theory of performativity, which so clearly rejects a concept of a single human condition (2006a [1990]).

But even as Butler suggests the possibility for a shared human condition, she calls the possibility (and desirability) of such conditions into question. Later in *Precarious Life* she suggests, “We make a mistake, therefore, if we take a single definition of the human, or a single model of rationality, to be the defining feature [of the human]” (2006b [2004]: 90). In this discussion Butler is working to undermine a common definition of the human that would be based on a determinable set of cultural features or standards of rationality—features and standards that might demarcate the limits of what would be considered human, and therefore, grievable life. For Butler, the limits of the human that are revealed in the rhetoric of politicians and pundits wishing to determine a field of insiders and outsiders can (and should) unsettle taken-for-granted notions of what counts as human. To take up the “challenge to rethink the

human,” then is “part of the democratic trajectory of an evolving human rights jurisprudence” (2006b [2004]: 90). In this way, Butler presents the problem of the human as a central aspect of political, and specifically democratic, life. Yet, she immediately returns to the logic of the universal by elaborating “an ongoing task of humans rights” is “to reconceive the human when it finds that its putative universality does not have universal reach” (2006b [2004]: 90). My point here is not that Butler is simply contradicting herself. Instead, I am trying to make clear that how we treat the figure and subject position of the human has critical consequences for how we consider the possibilities for life and difference. Further, Butler’s use of the human reflects the difficulty of avoiding the repetition of the trope of alienation that reads the ends of politics as the recovery or realization of a universal protected condition like “human rights.”

In her approach to the question of the human, then, Butler introduces two distinct images of the human. On one side, the human operates as a status or subject position required in order for one’s life to be considered grievable, and thus, for one’s life to be liveable, to bear political agency, and to matter on the scene of normative practices of politics and ethics. The possibility of being, or even becoming, included in the discourse of the “human” provides the grounds both for the possibility of mattering politically (that is, having one’s existence and desires register) and for protection from the potential violence with which restrictive norms and state practices threaten those who do not conform to them. The first problem here, to put it bluntly, is that this use of

the language of the human serves as too smooth an explanation for the atrocities and injustices we commit against one another. Under this rubric, it becomes too easy to explain violence as the result of an abstract process of dehumanization or as an exclusion (or expulsion) from the realm of the human. This problem brings with it another: it risks overstating the power of dominant norms to silence and incapacitate those who fall outside of, are excluded by, or oppose such norms and practices. That is, from Butler's perspective, the definition of the human already seems to set the terms of the debate successfully, thus foreclosing the challenging of the limits of the human from the start. Thus, her account overvalues the power of "the human" to protect us from the harm and injustices we might do to one another. Yet, as with Deleuze's critique of organic representation, this image of the human makes "the human" into a matter of "more or less," as if we could determine in advance the answer to what makes a liveable "human" life. Like White's turn to finitude, relying on the recognition of the vulnerability of the other as a means for achieving "the human" short-circuits the very political negotiation of the terms of the human. Further, it threatens to obscure the conditions under which we do violence to each other.

To understand how the image of the human functions in this way, we need to look closely at how Butler theorizes the making of the "human" and the meaning of dehumanization. Following a certain reading of Foucault, Butler has consistently argued that normative categories like the human are constructed in a "field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as

‘the human’” (2011 [1993]: xvii). For Butler the key to this process of defining a category like the human is that it occurs through “exclusionary means” that begin not just with what counts as human and inhuman, but with that which must both be excluded, and more powerfully, not allowed to be spoken or to exist.⁵² Thus, as she writes, “the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (2011 [1993]: xvii). As such, the category of the human is defined against a “constitutive outside” that is not merely the inhuman, but a form of life that is “derealized,” “spectral,” “deconstituted” (cf. 2006b [2004]: 34, 91). Dehumanization, then, takes on a function in Butler’s work that differs from the common trope that reads dehumanization as an effect of violence and injustice. Instead, for Butler “dehumanization” occurs first. In other words, the very defining of the human requires the production of a zone of dehumanization that then makes possible the practice of violence and injustice against those who already find themselves “derealized” or “deconstituted” by the normative category of the human from which they are excluded (2006b [2004]: 34). As she writes, “dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human” (2006b [2004]: 91).

Butler’s understanding of the human and the dehumanized then makes possible her now well-known account of “grievability.” In *Precarious Life* she presents a case in

⁵² As I argue in Chapter 5, this reading of the formation of normative categories/subject positions is very different from Deleuze’s reading of Foucault (and we could argue from Foucault’s own account of subject formation, at least in his late work) in which the outside of discursive practice is not defined only by exclusion but also by the eluding and escaping that very outside. Thus, the outside is granted an agency or power that Butler seems unable to allow.

which the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2002 refused to publish obituaries for two Palestinian families who had been killed by Israeli troops. For Butler, this refusal marks the unwillingness, or perhaps inability, of the West to recognize these lives as grievable, and thus human, lives. Their exclusion from the public realm (at least in the form of this particular newspaper) is, for Butler, a result of the prior dehumanization of Palestinian lives in the very construction of the normative definition of the human, which then blocks our ability to connect to them in a shared experience of vulnerability and grievability. That is, they simply do not show up for us, and thus they do not matter. Butler argues that “if there were to be an obituary there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition...It is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable” (2006b [2004]: 35). The key to overcoming these conditions, then, would be to recognize and respond to the vulnerability and grievability of the other—to see that we share in the condition that she calls “precarious life.”

On its face, Butler’s insistence on the grievability of all lives as an ethical ideal for politics seems difficult to dispute. Yet, as I have been arguing here, the problem with this perspective arises from the way that Butler accounts for the relationship between the human and its others (as dehumanized, derealized, etc.). Butler’s image of the human relies upon a model of visibility and invisibility, of the real and the derealized. In this way, Butler’s position presumes that the solution to the problems of violence and injustice depends upon the recovery, recognition, and making-visible of

the humanness of the other. The result, however, is that Butler overlooks, for instance, both the ways that her “dehumanized” others do in fact appear in the public realm and the possibility that this analysis itself devalues the struggle of those whose lives are read as derealized and spectral.⁵³ As such, the power to determine these conditions appears to rest with a dominant, or even hostile, other.

Yet, from another perspective, Butler also offers a view of the “human” as a more dynamic field of contestation where the political and ethical terms of the human are dramatized and played out. Butler’s call to “rethink the human” provides inspiration for challenging “the normative notion of the human, a normative notion of what the body of a human must be” (2006b [2004]: 33). Drawing upon the impulse of her development of the concepts of iterability and citationality, in *Undoing Gender* Butler moves toward a language and understanding of the human that exceeds the framework of recovery and that turns instead on the contestation of the normative use of the “human.” There she considers what it would mean to disrupt the language of the human and human rights, which she reads as masculinist and racial constructions, by resignifying human rights as, for instance, “women’s human rights” or “lesbian and gay human rights” (2004: 38). Her response moves out of the normative frame of the human: “It says that such groups have their own set of human rights, that what human

⁵³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes a related argument in a discussion of alternatives to a hermeneutics of suspicion. She writes: “While there is plenty of hidden violence that requires exposure there is also, and increasingly, an ethos where forms of violence that are hypervisible from the start may be offered as an exemplary spectacle rather than remain to be unveiled as a scandalous secret. Human rights controversy around, for example, torture and disappearances in Argentina or the use of mass rape as part of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia marks, not an unveiling of practices that had been hidden or naturalized, but a wrestle of different frameworks of visibility” (2003: 140). I will take up this discussion again in Chapter 4.

may mean when we think about the humanness of women is perhaps different from what human has meant when it has functioned presumptively as male" (2004: 38). Here Butler's mode of political contestation depends not on the acts of recognition and making visible a shared condition, but in contesting the notion of a shared condition as the basis for politics and for human rights in the first place. In moments like these, the notion of the human does serve as the ground of subversive political action, but it also, paradoxically, promises to be a safe harbor from the vicissitudes of that very political life. This tension drives Butler's work—a tension between a focus on survival and a desire for subversion as the primary aim of feminist and queer politics and theory. The focus on survival has come to mark the starting point for ethics, whereas the orientation toward subversion motivates the more radical political dimensions of Butler's thought. But if the figure of the human can truly remain *politically* salient, I argue, this latter dimension of dynamism and contestability—of the human at the limits—must be our focus. If there is to be a rethinking of the human as Butler suggests, it must arise here, where settled concepts of the human are already being challenged by lives no less human for not being called human.

What is a Liveable Life?

The rhetoric of universal rights, in which Butler's ethical turn is rooted, contains within it an assumption that we can fail to see others as humans, or at least that we are able to dehumanize others in order to allow for their being treated as other than

human. However, I contend that to defend this claim as Butler (implicitly) does, runs the risk of foreclosing the question of the human by turning the issue of particular practices and their effects into a general problem of recognition. I draw inspiration for my claims about the human in this chapter from a reading of Stanley Cavell's contention in *The Claim of Reason* that we cannot fail to see other humans as human (see Cavell 1979: Part IV). Cavell challenges the familiar argument that atrocities from slavery to war crimes to abortion (from the perspective of those who oppose it) can be attributed to some humans seeing or treating some other humans as less than or not at all human. In making this argument Cavell is not suggesting that people never *claim* to fail to see some others as human. Instead, he, on my reading, is making two other, related points. First, Cavell argues that when we claim to fail to see the other as human we can mean "nothing definite" by this claim (1979: 376). That is, claiming to fail to see some other as human can only be meant relatively or perspectively. The effects of this way of seeing may be disastrous for some lives, but from this Cavellian perspective, it does not saturate or fix the scene of possibilities for those other lives as Butler's theory of norms seems to do.

Second, Cavell argues that the moral or ethical response to the other is not a matter of knowledge or recognition, particularly of their humanity. Responding to another, for Cavell, is not a matter of knowledge or recognition in which I might be shown something about the other that might make me come to see her humanity. If there is something missing here, it not the recognition of the other's humanness.

Instead, the exclusion of the other is more an exclusion from the realm of justice (1979: 377). Thus, for Cavell, the ethical dilemma of slavery, torture, and so on is not that we fail to see some others as humans. On the contrary, “The anxiety in the image of slavery [we could include other atrocities that fall under the banner of abuses of human rights]...is that it really is a way in which certain human beings can treat certain others whom they know, or all but know, to be human beings. Rather than admit this we say that the ones do not regard the others as human beings at all” (Cavell 1979: 377). Attributing the violence and harm we do to others to their dehumanization, instead of sharpening our view of these practices, relieves us of the anxiety we might feel about what some humans are capable of doing to others they “*all but know*” to be humans. The appeal to a failure to see the other as human marks an evasion of these actual conditions and practices. Cavell, thus, offers a different conception of what it means to respond to, or acknowledge the human: “What is implied is that it is essential to knowing that something is human that we sometimes experience it as such, and sometimes do not, or fail to; that certain alterations of consciousness take place, and sometimes not, in the face of it” (1979: 379). This experience of the human as something that attempts to acknowledge the uncertainty and inconsistency of how we understand and respond to the other is much closer to the image of the human as alienated that I began developing in the previous chapter.

Here Cavell radically inverts the typical logic of the human by suggesting that even our experiences of failing to see the other as human (and our processes of

dehumanization) are part of what it means to know and respond to the human. That is, Cavell's analysis reveals that the violences we do one another, far from erasing the humanness of the other, can (and should) provoke us to see that the humanness of the other is what is at stake at every turn. Take, for example, Frederick Douglass's description of the relationship between the slave and the slaveholder. Certainly, in his autobiography, he often highlights the experience of slavery as an attempt to undermine or deny his humanness. However, in "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," he argues that his humanness was never in question, even to the slaveowners, and thus puts into question a reading of slavery as institution built upon something like a prior zone of dehumanization:

Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slaveholders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia which, if committed by a black man (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of the same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment. What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being? (2000 [1852]: 195)

In these lines Douglass calls attention to the fact that slaves and blacks are abused not because they are subject to a kind of erasure or derealization that then allows for their being abused. Instead, in this reading, Douglass points out that the institutions of slavery and oppression are in fact violent, cruel responses to an expression of the human itself. These institutions might aim to undermine, or even eradicate, the agency of these "other" humans, but they ultimately cannot. In fact, the institution itself

reinforces that the humanness of the other is always at stake, even when it is read as dangerous and worthy of control or even death.

Butler's view of the human as a kind of norm of recognition constructed upon the dehumanization and derealization of marginalized groups then misses the political point that arises from Cavell's reading of the human and from Douglass's self-description. For her argument takes for granted that to remain outside dominant orders of recognition or a position of abjection will mean that one's agency and worth will be denied. But the examples from Cavell and Douglass bring this image of the human into question. To make this point clear, it is helpful to return to the discussion begun above on the construction of the figure of the human to see what Butler and her interlocutors see as missing in the "extra-human and extra-juridical sphere of life" (Butler 2006b [2004]: 91). Addressing the question of the human in Butler requires that one take up a constellation of key concepts that appear in various forms throughout her work. In the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble* Butler writes that her attempt to denaturalize gender came from "a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such" (2006a [1990]: xxi). Throughout her work, she variously characterizes the fulfillment of this possible life as "livable" (2006a [1990]: xxiii) and "intelligible" (2006a [1990]: 22). Conversely, an unlivable life is "foreclosed" (2006a [1990]: xxi), "false unreal, and unintelligible" (2006a [1990]: xxv), "illegible" (2004: 5), and "less than" (2004: 2), or "not human at all" (2004: 2).

For Butler, then, the less-than-human or unintelligible primarily lack recognition and visibility, or categories of recognition in which to realize oneself that are not already characterized by repressive norms (cf. Butler 2004: 3). From this perspective this lack of visibility, in turn, seems to imply that those who fall outside recognized norms simply do not matter. As Chambers and Carver explain this point, the unintelligible lack the agency of a subject because they are not received into intelligible discourse. They write, the “terms of intelligibility” that grant one visibility and legitimacy as a subject may not allow “the ‘I’ that appears in deviant gender, racial or sexual form. . .to ‘appear’ at all” (2008: 88). On Moya Lloyd’s reading, the lack of social, legal, and political validity means that those who fall outside normative recognition “simply will not matter” (2007: 33). Conversely, a liveable life, according to Lloyd, is one having “value and legitimacy” (2007: 33). Similarly, Chambers and Carver construe a liveable life as being dependent on being a “recognisable subject...thought through the idea of a ‘received subject’ that involves being recognized as intelligible” (2008: 78). Thus, it appears that in order to matter, one must be able to appear in the realm of intelligibility and the human, even if the intelligible is already determined by the terms of exclusive norms.

All of these perspectives focus on the repressed (or the impossibility of) visibility of lives and forms of agency that fall outside established norms and practices, thus allowing for their systematic exclusion and repression. The question, then, is how to account for norms that can be simultaneously totalizing in the exclusion of non-

normative lives *and* open to contestation by these very inhuman, unintelligible, unlivable lives. Butler has provided answers to this question throughout her work, even she has simultaneously undermined and covered over that position by reifying the power of norms and the violence of the subject formation.⁵⁴ As Butler argues through her development of the concept of citationality, the bounds of the unintelligible and the invisible are always already being challenged. In her discussion of the category of gender in *Gender Trouble* Butler contends that normative categories are always incomplete; thus, they are always open to being filled in by contestable meanings (2006a [1990]: 21). Likewise, the notion of personhood as regulated by gender and sexuality norms of intelligibility is always already contested by persons who fail to conform to these norms (2006a [1990]: 23). Because of these discontinuities and the overflow of subjectivity from the bounds of intelligibility, breaking or expanding these boundaries is always a possibility already in play (2006a [1990]: 40). She further argues that the making invisible of both dominant norms, and those they exclude, requires performative repetition from the subjects of these (gender) norms, and because the performance of norms is always incomplete and unsuccessful, norms always remain open to contestation. Deviant expressions, then, may promise to expand the range of legitimacy to more kinds of subjects, but they do not do so easily. Obviously, the visibility of deviant expressions is one of the primary instigators of violence against marginalized people. Yet, the incompleteness and boundlessness of categories and

⁵⁴ For Butler's most complete account of subject formation, see *The Psychic Life of Power*. I take up a discussion of her account of subjectivity in the next chapter.

expressions of gender, sexuality, and the human has important effects for thinking about the livability and intelligibility of lives and the possibilities for political agency.

Always, Already Human

As becomes apparent in Butler's account of the functioning of norms, far from making invisible those who do not conform to norms, we see that their lives make them more visible as aberrations from dominant normative practices. To illustrate this point, consider the reciprocal, reiterative process that works to make invisible (always incompletely) both norms and those who conform to them. In describing the working of gender norms, Butler argues that "gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through compulsory heterosexuality" (2006a [1990]: 43). This attempt at uniformity works to restrict and regulate aberrant expressions of sexuality, thus exposing such expressions all the more. If we look from the other direction at this description of normativity, we see the Foucaultian point that these discursive practices, rather than aberrant expressions of them, are precisely what are always being covered over; when dominant norms are enforced, awareness of their normative function can slip out of view.⁵⁵ Thus, Chambers and Carver can claim, following Butler, that "to do gender 'right' is to remain unmarked by societal gender norms" (2008a: 89). Read this way, it appears that if there is a place where some subjects fail to see others as human, it is within the functioning of norms of

⁵⁵ As both Foucault (2002 [1978]) and Butler (2002) suggest, the role of critique, then, is to bring these norms back to visibility.

intelligibility themselves. To be able to be unmarked by societal gender norms is to be able to forget the contingency and incompleteness of these normative practices (and one's own identity insofar as it remains within safe distance of norms of behavior). The regulative practices of the normative system take over the responsibility of relationship that would be demanded of us if contingency were made visible. As with Cavell's reading of the language of the human, the relative invisibility of norms (so long as things are going smoothly) allows us to forget, or ignore, the contingency, and at times arbitrariness, of normative practices.

If conforming to norms makes one less visible, then, we can see that the possible disruption of a given normative order is the very reason that expression of gender deviance (or claims for justice, equal treatment, and so on, where such claims are not welcome or are even forbidden) is so dangerous—it reveals our anxiety about our practices and marks deviance for violence. As Chambers and Carver put the point, “To do our gender ‘wrong’ is to open ourselves up to normative violence because we mark our gender and sexuality as potentially non-normative” (2008a: 89). That is, we have made ourselves visible or spoken up in the face of normative order that knows, or all but knows, that we are already present and human, even if it wishes for things to be otherwise. The response of normative violence is not the result of dehumanization or a life rendered unintelligible, but rather a response to the very expression of the human itself. Expressing oneself deviantly seems to be the very thing that marks, or reveals, one as human, that is, as a contingent, discontinuous, overflowing expression of

subjectivity in relation, but not in lockstep, with a set of norms. Deviant expression *makes visible* the contingency of normative structures in/on the body of the subject. We cannot fail to see that human as human. The punishment for this expression may be swift and harsh, but it cannot be because I fail to see you as human. Your life is too livable; your life (contra Lloyd's reading of Butler) *matters too much*. In it I see the unpredictable ways humans are capable of living.

Like a moment of Heideggerian breakdown, these moments of disruption of normative practices reveal our involvement with the world and with others. When things break, or fall out of their ordinary role in everyday ways of being, they stand out and reveal our relationship to them (Heidegger 1962). Heidegger's discussion of "breakdown," though staged in the context of the 'equipmentality' of Dasein's existence, can provide a helpful lens for examining the functioning of norms. For this purpose, we can consider two forms of breakdown that Heidegger discusses: the broken tool and the obstinate tool. In both cases, Heidegger argues that the breakdown of the everyday context allows us to become aware of our "normal" relations by disrupting them. In the case of the broken tool, the implement becomes conspicuous as an unworkable tool that must either be repaired or be replaced in order to return to "normal" relations. The obstinate tool, on the other hand, gets in the way of work and stands out as an impediment to the normal functioning of the everyday. In the context of norms, I suggest, we can read the aberrant expression of the human as somewhere between the broken and the obstinate. Deviant expressions appear both as unworkable

in terms of established norms and as obstinate refusals to go along with accepted ways of being. These expressions produce trouble because they threaten both the functioning of established orders and the contingency of these orders that their smooth functioning covers over.

Moments of breakdown—as deviant or unacceptable performances of identity and as eruptions of resistance to and violence against such expression—reveal the anxiety that we feel about the real possibilities for the human as various subjects push against established norms and their limits. For as always already human (in deviant forms), marginalized subjects are always already engaged in the logic and mechanism of subversion.⁵⁶ Butler, too, turns to Heidegger in a similar way in *Antigone's Claim*, noting that for Heidegger “participation in what is non-living turns out to be something like the condition of living itself” and that “proximity to being involves estrangement from living beings even as it is the ground of their very emergence” (2000: 92-93, n.4). Norms seem to operate in this experience of estrangement at the ground of experience, which makes them both powerfully violent as attempts to cover over this anxiety and powerfully modifiable as always already contestable. The human is revealed at this moment of uncertainty at the limits of the norms and zones of intelligibility that give shape to our subjectivity. As Butler writes, “we cannot precisely give content to this

⁵⁶ It is important not to suggest a glorified image of the work of subversion or downplay the suffering of those who do not conform to heteronormativity, who are the subject of indiscriminate bombings, or who are tortured in the name of national security. As Butler convincingly argues: “to veer from the norm is to produce the aberrant example that regulatory power may quickly exploit” (2006b [2004]: 52). Indeed, to deviate from the norm marks one for violence, and the regulatory power of the norm can “foreclose the thinkability of its disruption” (2006b [2004]: 43).

person at the very moment that he speaks his worth, which means that it is precisely the ways in which he is not fully recognizable, fully disposable, fully categorizable, that his humanness emerges" (2008: 73).

The political salience of this emerging humanness is at least twofold. Negatively, it can be addressed violently as an aberrant articulation to be punished in the name of reinforcing the norm. Positively, as Lloyd points out, Butler uses this kind of moment to show how challenges to the norm are intrinsic to the norm itself (Lloyd 2007: 152). Thus, we can begin to provide an answer to Butler's question of how to think of "the one with no place who nevertheless seeks to claim one within speech, the unintelligible as it emerges in the intelligible" (Butler 2000: 78). This emergence, on the account I have been trying to give here, is not from not mattering to mattering or from invisibility to visibility. The limits of norms are always contestable sites where the human—the one we can accept and the one that we try to cover over—is always at stake. How this emergence occurs—and how it is presented and received—will determine whether it shows up as a kind of ethical recognition of a common humanity or as a political intervention into the order of dominant norms.

The Human, Politics, and Ethics in the AIDS Crisis

To illustrate this point more fully, consider Leo Bersani's reading of the response to the AIDS epidemic in "Is the Rectum a Grave?". Bersani begins by pointing out the apparently obvious claim that the US government's (specifically, the Reagan

administration's) lack of response to the growing epidemic and the increasing number of deaths of homosexual men illustrates that the life, suffering, and death of gay men did not matter and failed to warrant intervention. But Bersani goes on to show how this logic of not mattering is actually evidence of its opposite. Bersani argues that in investigating the (now seen as early) responses to the AIDS epidemic we must pay attention to the "fantasmatic logic" that attends it. As evidence he points to a report in the *New York Times* that attributed to the mayor of Arcadia, Florida, where a family's home was torched because three boys who lived there were rumored to have AIDS, the following position: "a lot of local people, including himself, believed that powerful interests, principally the national gay leaders, had pressured the Government into refraining from taking legitimate steps to help containing the spread of AIDS" (Nordheimer 1987: A1; quoted in Bersani 1987: 210). Bersani points out both the fantastical argument (at that time) that any gay leaders were powerful enough "to pressure the federal government to do anything at all" and that somehow those "hit most heavily by AIDS want nothing more intensely than to see it spread unchecked" (1987: 211). More powerfully he shows how this assumption implies that "those being killed are killers" (1987: 211). Further, "the presumed original desire to kill gays may itself be understandable only in terms of the fantasy for which it is offered as an explanation: homosexuals are killers" (1987: 211).

Here, the fear of the spread of HIV/AIDS figures gay men, not as lives that do not matter, but as larger-than-life perpetrators of sexual deviance and carriers of

disease and death. Gay men appear on the scene of the HIV/AIDS crisis as an expression of the human that the social order cannot yet process or handle. If their lives were not yet grievable in Butler's terms, it was not because their lives did not matter. Instead, their lives mattered intensely, and it is only *as human* that their lives show up as deviant and dangerous. Following Foucault, we might say that their lives must be disallowed to the point of death (Foucault 1994 [1978]: 138). But we must not read this disallowing of life as a response made possible by a prior process of dehumanization, for that risks forgetting the politics of the social order that made such suffering possible by turning a specific political conjuncture into a generic process of dehumanization.

Bersani's portrayal of the AIDS crisis and of queer responses to it additionally warns against an easy amelioration of these damaging conditions through expanded social recognition of identities and practices. Bersani worries about what he calls the "*redemptive reinvention of sex*" (1987: 215, emphasis in original) that has arisen from "contemporary discourse that argues for a radically revised imagination of the body's capacity for pleasure" (215). Bersani is particularly concerned that a celebration of the pleasures of the body that might arise out of a particular reading of Foucault will cover over our ongoing anxieties about various sexual practices. That is, a quick move to a generic pluralist embrace of multiplicity can overlook the importance of the specificity of lives and practices.⁵⁷ The political ends to which Bersani directs this critique are

⁵⁷ It should be noted that it was much easier to imagine a more generic pluralism in 1986, when Bersani wrote this essay, than it is today, given the development of theories of pluralism. Of particular

different from my own here, but his criticism is important nonetheless.⁵⁸ For if we make the AIDS crisis and the response to it into a simple story of the recognition of the vulnerability, the grievability, and thus the humanity of gay men and their sex practices, which has led to their redemptive admission into the world of political mattering and agency, then we lose the sight of the political salience of their lives, and their agency, before, during, and after the gay rights revolution. This story would become an ethical one of recovery, rather a political one that required the reconfiguration of norms through the disruption of and intervention in the normative order.

The turn to the ethical task of mourning, as Honig points out in her reading of Douglas Crimp, “was unavoidable in the face of devastating losses [of so many lives to AIDS] but it was also dangerous: it threatened to absorb the much-needed political energies of a nascent movement” (Honig 2013: 75). The work of mourning, as Honig points out, does not necessarily stifle the movement’s political energy, though it can too easily slide in that direction. In her discussion of controversy of the AIDS Names Project quilt, Honig juxtaposes the more political response of Crimp’s ambivalent attitude toward the quilt with Butler’s embracing of it as “exemplary, ritualizing and repeating the name itself as a way of publically avowing limitless loss” (Butler 1997:

importance to this development is William Connolly’s notion of pluralization as an ever on-going process of working for a more plural world (Connolly 1995). Butler turns to this concept of pluralization in her critique of Zionism in *Parting Ways*.

⁵⁸ In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Bersani points to the more negative aspects of what he see as the masochistic impulse inherent in (sexual) desire. This focus has led to the portrayal of his queer politics as primarily anti-social (cf. Halberstam 2011). In this way, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” takes a more negative tone in comparison to the more redemptive view of masochism in *The Freudian Body*, where Bersani declares that “*masochism serves life*” (1986: 54).

188 quoted in Honig 2013: 61). Crimp, as Honig writes, “worries that the quilt undoes the passion and anger of activism.” Further, “Making gay male *deaths grievable*, Crimp worries contra Butler *avant la lettre* we might say, is less an achievement than making gay male *lives acceptable*” (2013: 62, emphasis in original).

To put the point a bit differently: the issue here is not to make gay men grievable so that they might matter, but to make gay men matter in such a way that their deaths may cause us grief and also provoke us to anger (or even rage). This shift in emphasis from Butler’s concept of grievability more clearly foregrounds the way that, in this case, gay men mattered (and mattered intensely) politically before the widespread mourning of their suffering and deaths. Further, the political movement provoked by the outrage over their suffering focuses attention on the specific ways that they were actively ignored and excluded: not because they did not matter or were considered inhuman, but because their expression of humanness threatened the given order. The move to public grief over the AIDS crisis, most notably in the AIDS quilt and the red ribbons campaign, threatens to obscure the responsibility we bear for the violence and harm caused by the social order. Our anxiety over these conditions, in the act of mourning, can be too easily ameliorated by the ability to mourn publicly together. We need only to see the act of holding vigils and announcing our grief on social networking sites as evidence of the depoliticizing power of these kinds of acts of mourning. For once the grief and outrage has been expressed collectively via these collective acts of mourning, it often quickly fades from view. Thus, Honig can write,

“The risk is that we let go of the rage and righteous anger that feed political protest, activism, and self-organization. ‘We Have Turned Our Anger into a Piece of Quilt and Red Ribbons’ read one ACT UP poster (Sturken 1997: 173)” (2013: 62).

Survival or Subversion?

The tension in responses to the AIDS crisis between mourning and activism parallels the dichotomy in Butler’s work between a politics of subversion and an ethics of grievability. This tension manifests itself perhaps most starkly in Butler’s theory of the subject, particularly as it is articulated in *The Psychic Life of Power*. There Butler wants to interrogate what pre-subjective entity or drive might cause us to turn to becoming subjects, to give ourselves over to terms of existence that we do not author. The basic answer for Butler is survival. That is, there must be some kind of Spinozan conative drive for existence and persistence that pushes us to accept the (mostly unhappy on Butler’s reading) terms of becoming a subject (Chambers 2003: Chapter 5 and Lloyd 2007: 102). This drive reinforces the vulnerability of the human because, as she argues, “the desire to survive, ‘to be,’ is a pervasively exploitable desire” (Butler 1997a: 7). To be a subject, then, originally means to be vulnerable, manipulable, repressible because our desire to be forces us to take up the conditions of existence that we do not determine. The “factual” story behind this condition, for Butler, is the fact that we all begin as children and, thus, are always at the mercy of another. For Butler, the basic terms of subjectivity, then, involve an originary vulnerability and,

indeed, “unfreedom.” Moreover, to be a subject is to be caught in the “the bind of self-expression” (Butler 2006a [1990]: xxiv) in which the subject is never able to speak in her own voice, but only in the terms by which she has been conferred subjectivity.

Even so, Butler argues that, again, the phenomenon of iteration makes it possible that the agency that comes along with subjection can to some extent outrun the terms of our subjection. Further, she suggests that we can loosen the knot of subjection, even if we cannot untie it or break the (apparently vicious) circle. One way to loosen these binds is to form a kind of passionate attachment to the terms of our subjection that grants some increased agency in determining which ways of life we live (Butler 1997a: 66). This account of the subject, then, requires an ability to manipulate “the gap between the originating context or intention by which an utterance is animated and the effects it produces” (Butler 1997b: 14), which the notion of the conative drive works to provide. The problem here is that for Butler the possibility of escaping these terms of subjectivity requires a new form of spectral existence. She suggests that turning away from the normative forms of existence calls for a form of agency that can resist the norm’s “lure of identity, an agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence. Such a turn demands a willingness *not* to be—a critical desubjectivation—in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems” (Butler 1997a: 130). This turn to desubjectivation as an alternative to the binds of subjectivity, we can now see, parallels Butler’s understanding of the human in relation to the power of norms. For on Butler’s account the alternative to recognition or

inclusion in dominant norms is a life of spectrality or unreality from the perspective of the dominant normative order. The difference here is that the unreality, which previously featured as an unhappy condition of abjection and invisibility, now shows up as potentially felicitous condition for the reclamation of the terms of subjectivity (and perhaps of subversion of dominant norms as well). Butler's own attachment to the melancholic, on her account, conditions of subjectivity, however, continues to threaten to drag down this more disruptive impulse in her theory of subjectivity.

Despite the spectrality of this state of being, in *Antigone's Claim* Butler argues that there is an important, if peculiar, form of agency here. She suggests that the body of the abject exists in an ontologically suspended mode where it persists "in spite of its foreclosure" by dominant norms (Butler 2000: 78). In this way, the human always exceeds the terms of normative recognition and its attendant images of human identity. Therefore, it marks the site of desire that can exceed and persist in spite of repressive normative practices. This ecstatic persistence serves as a fecund source of political agency because even in this basic persistence, the subject has the possibility of subverting and recasting the possibilities open to it. As Butler suggests, this persistence allows for the possibility of an "aberrant unprecedented future" through the possibility of fantasy (Butler 2000, 82; also see Butler 2004: 27). From this perspective the agency of the human emerges in the fantastical ability to make the "impossible claim" of acting and speaking "as if you were human," in spite of the foreclosure of those possibilities in reality (Butler 2004: 27-30).

Here Butler's example of "women's human rights" comes into view as an "impossible claim" that has become a reality as a call to political action against the injustices done to women in our masculinist social order. By putting together these terms together in an apparently "inappropriate" way, the possibility of disrupting the normative force of "women," "human rights," and a whole constellation of terms is put into play. Agency emerges, then, in spite of its foreclosure by the normative image of the human and intelligibility. As Butler writes, "If there is an operation of agency, or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of enabling and limiting field of constraint. This ethical agency is neither fully determined nor radically free" (2005: 19). It is uncertain whether a reader like Honig would find this "ethical agency" sufficient for the task of politics, but I find in its emphasis on a potential for agency (one that lies between determinism and radical freedom) an important recasting of the figure of the human and the agentic possibilities open to it. I hold on to the significance of this casting despite the fact that Butler herself slides back toward a focus on the unhappy conditions of being a subject, when she notes that this freedom "is made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of this primary condition of unfreedom" (Butler 2005: 19). We come closer to capturing the experience of alienation and agency (or even alienated agency) when we remain with the notion of agency between determinism and freedom. When we turn back to an abstracted initial condition of unfreedom, then we risk returning to a project of recovery, or at least melancholy, of a primary freedom that cannot be.

A Politics of the Human

Given the ethical and normative pull of the concept of the human, it remains an open question whether we can have a politics of the human (or of a humanism). Honig's response to this dilemma is to call for an "agonistic humanism" that privileges natality and contestation over vulnerability and mortalism (Honig 2010: 4). The presumption of agonism, however, is that one can simply struggle. The ambiguity (and, indeed, inconsistency) of Butler's treatment of the human calls into question the presumption of struggle by privileging the problem of survival that surely attends the lives of the abject. Must struggle and survival, and the political and ethical, remain opposed? The question might be whether there are also forms of mattering and agentic capacities that can emerge from the need for and the conditions of survival, those in which we are always given over to (and potentially undone by) others. The persistent mattering of the human that I have been advocating in this chapter offers the possibility of seeing the kinds of agency and potential for politics that endures in the concept of the human. Here I offer one more example of (alienated) human expression that is suspended between the drives for struggle and survival. In recent years, a Zimbabwean women's movement, Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), has developed in response to the abuses of the Mugabe regime. The women often demonstrate in the streets even though they are typically quickly arrested, detained, and intimidated. One way of theorizing these conditions might be to read them as a result or practice of dehumanization in which these women are being made invisible by the ongoing

repression of the Mugabe regime. But I think it is crucial to listen to their own self-description here. In an interview on Public Radio International one woman described the protests as an expression of the human: “When we go to the street and demonstrate, we are human beings enjoying our freedom. They will never take away the beauty, the joy, and the celebration of those moments when we are on the street” (*The World*: 22 April 2013). As witnesses of experiences like these, it is crucial that we not take them as lives that have been derealized and caused not to matter. These protests and other like expressions of subversion present a complex of the human as a form of life that at once is free and restrained, oppressor and oppressed, and perhaps even human and inhuman. In the case of the WOZA women, subversion and survival are intimately linked.

To develop this point, I turn to Jacques Rancière’s reading of “the rights of man” in which he offers a criticism of the rhetoric of the rights that parallels my account of the human here (Rancière 2004).⁵⁹ Rancière resists Arendt’s claim that there are those who are rendered inhuman and, thus, denied human rights, and in so doing he pushes the claim of the universalism of human rights to its limit. Against the idea, put in Butler’s terms, that the putative universalism of human rights is “not yet the case,” Rancière offers this provocative restatement of the logic of human rights: “The Rights of

⁵⁹ For a discussion that focuses more particularly on the relationship between Arendt and Rancière’s reading of her concept of “the right to have rights,” see Andrew Schapp (2011). Many words have been written on Arendt’s conception of human rights. Those that have been important for my work here include James Ingram (2008), Frank Michelman (1996), Honig (2005). Joe Hoover has, likewise, taken up an analysis of the language of the “human” in human rights, focusing on the ambiguity of the “human” through the work of William Connolly and Bonnie Honig (Hoover 2013).

Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not" (2004: 302). That is, the putative universalism of human rights necessarily implies that everyone already possesses them. Therefore, in their inability to enact these rights, the excluded illustrate the limits of the power and accessibility of human rights, for they "possess" them but cannot utilize them. In this way, Rancière refuses the logic that those people who fall outside of a given regime of "the human" (or of the police) are simply dehumanized or are somehow excluded from the possible universality of human rights. As he notes, "this attempt [at dehumanization] depopulates the political stage by sweeping aside the always-ambiguous actors" (2004: 301). Against this move, Rancière affirms the universalism of human rights in a very particular way by showing that those who are denied these rights can and do continue to claim them, drawing upon the universality of human rights that putatively extends to everyone. As he suggests, "The Rights of man are the rights of those who make something of that inscription who decide not only to 'use' their rights but also to build such and such a case for the verification of the power of the inscription" (2004: 303). Human rights on Rancière's account are universal only insofar as *anyone* can claim them and attempt to make use of them. The human, and human rights, then, cannot be determined in advance by a set of norms and the limits that they draw. "Politics," as Rancière puts it, "is about that border" (2004: 303). The possibilities for politics, dissensus, and agonism become less available when we accept or affirm in advance what counts as human, as mattering, as struggle, or even as the political or ethical. The

desire and struggle for survival itself may contain within it certain modes of politics that we might be able to locate alongside given regimes of the human and of ethics and politics.

Perhaps there is another way to frame my question of the always-already human: lives persist in spite of being closed out, and their persistence, even if they do not know what they are doing, continues to challenge the hegemony of dominant social and normative orders. In continuing to live lives even outside the normative structure of the police, these lives are always already beginning to construct a new scene (Rancière 1999 [1005] and 2001). Despite the ontological suspension of their state of being, in Butler's terms, they are nonetheless never completely wiped out. A politics of subversion might work this way: take the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay who were systematically named "detainees" in order to cover over their claims for basic human rights. From one perspective the state has worked to strip them of humanity in order to indefinitely detain and even torture them. But on the account I have been trying to give, the state and its norms of the human cannot fully determine the situation, for there is an ever-ongoing contestation of the prisoners' status. As Rancière puts it, "These rights are theirs when they can do something with them to construct a dissensus against the denial of rights they suffer. *And there are always people among them who do it*" (305, emphasis added). Despite the foreclosure of the detainees right to speak, many of them through their hunger strikes and other acts of resistance, along with their lawyers and outside voices of families, communities, and activists, continue

to deviate and attempt to establish a new scene for their staging of “the wrong” of these practices.⁶⁰ The persistence of deviant forms of life requires a constant revision of limits of the human and the practices these limits allow.

On Butler’s terms, the issue at stake here is whether we can come to recognize the vulnerability and grievability of these people. But the central political issue is not that these people may or may not be grieved—grievability is not the issue here. Instead, the task is to illuminate and contest both these unjust conditions and the persistence of these people in spite of these injustices. The movements of these humans at the borders of what we *might call* human work to subvert—sometimes slowly eroding, and sometimes violently challenging—the power of certain norms to regulate our lives. This account works to relieve the problem of accounting for those who might be considered unintelligible or inhuman to find a way to cross the seemingly impossible epistemological, agentic gap into the terms of the livable, the intelligible, and the human. For, if the deviant is part of the structure of the norm itself, subversion is always already in play. In Butler’s words, “It [the norm] is overcome, in part, precisely through the repeated scandal by which the unspeakable nevertheless makes itself heard through borrowing and exploiting the very terms that are meant to enforce its silence” (2000: 78). To realize this latter impulse, then, may require a politics of the human that prioritizes the experience and expression of struggle over the

⁶⁰ The enactment of the political requires that those who have no part make use of this contingency to express themselves and make manifest the inequality of the current situation – in Rancière's words to declare “a wrong” (Rancière 1999: 39). As Samuel Chambers explains the function of the wrong for Rancière, “Politics is the declaration of wrongs, the staging of disagreements that serve to constitute the very parties of politics” (2012: 155).

desire for a common essence through which the “mattering” of all human beings will be made visible. The alienated condition of (human) life likely means that we cannot do away with the desire for or dream of a common essence in which to ground politics—the dialectic of alienation and recovery persists as a possibility for life and politics. The human, as one expression of difference in the world, is not a question of loss and recovery; instead, the human is always-already a process of a difference and repetition, human and inhuman, acknowledgment and betrayal. If we are to ameliorate the often brutal conditions of human life, then it cannot be a matter of moving from “the shade to the light, the inhuman to the human” but a matter of responding to the human and all that we are capable of doing to one another.

Interpellation and the Dilemmas of Subjectivity

In the previous chapter, I highlighted Butler's characterization of the desire "to be" as a "pervasively exploitable desire," and I mapped the implications for Butler's portrayal of the human and the problem of vulnerability. This position has profound effects for how we understand the relationship between the subject and the forms of power that condition its life and the possibilities for it. The turn to the shared vulnerability of human life tends to foreground the experience of wounding and violation in the life of becoming and being a subject. Such a position overplays the experience of being an "unhappy subject" and overemphasizes the power of certain conditions of subjectivity to determine the possibilities for experience that exceed these conditions. Further, this position expresses a drive to recover a freely chosen state of subjectivity that can never fully be, and, thus, moves toward a mode of reactive critique that stifles a politics of difference. In this chapter, I begin to develop a different image of the human (and of subjectivity) and its relationship to social and state power, and I reconsider the role of vulnerability and finitude in the description of and response to these forms of power.

To do so, I take up Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, particularly in relation to the apparatuses of ideology and the state. I turn to the question of the state here because the state is often viewed as a recalcitrant partner (or leader) in the enforcement of dominant norms, and I find in Althusser an understanding of the state

and its relationship to subjectivation that can begin to reconfigure our experience of the conditions of subjectivity. I begin here with Butler's reading of Althusser's notion of interpellation because I find in it an important starting point for moving into a reading of Althusser's notion of subjectivity and the state as an understanding of interpellation and subjectivity that gets around the primary focus on woundedness and vulnerability. Althusser and Butler ostensibly share the same political goals, though their approaches to the experience of subjectivity part ways after sharing a similar starting point. Butler's theory of subjectivity is motivated by the hope of "opening up of the possibility of agency" even as the subject is largely determined by conditions the subject cannot control (1997b: 15). Likewise, Althusser's project is motivated by a desire to create the "ideological conditions for the liberation and free development of social practices" though he posits the inevitability of ideology in general (1990 [1976]: 265). Thus, it is not surprising that Butler finds in Althusser's theory of subjectivation the beginnings, at least, of a theory of the subject that is open to the processes of resignification that she views as crucial to the prospects of having agency, particularly subversive agency against repressive forms of subjectivation.⁶¹ However, she ultimately rejects his theory for, on her reading, foreclosing the possibility being a "bad" subject in this way. In this chapter, however, I argue that Althusser has an answer to Butler's criticism—one that can overcome the grief over the lack of a self-determining subject and one that is better suited to respond to the alienating conditions of late-modern life and possibility

⁶¹ In Butler's words, Althusser's theory of ideology and interpellation at least begins to offer the possibility of "the misappropriation of interpellating performatives that is central to any project of the subversive territorialization and resignification of dominant social orders" (1997b: 154)

of a humanism at the limits. Althusser's model of subjectivity and the state provides resources for understanding how we might challenge the terms of political life that emerge out of the conditions of subjectivity themselves, rather than as a recovery (or even a hope or wish for recovery) of a self-determining subject or a common essence for politics. By affirming the alienated conditions of subjectivity, rather than grieving them, Althusser presents a model of the politics of the subject, ideology, and the state that reconfigures the dilemmas of structure and agency without further entrenching them. In other words, Althusser's theory of ideology and interpellation provides an opening for avoiding the abstracting and reactive forces of alienation and recovery by locating the agency of the subject within the terms and conditions of particular conjunctures of ideology and the state, even when these take on more repressive forms.

A Sorry Bind

Butler's theory of the subject is most clearly indebted to Foucault and Freud, but she also draws heavily from Althusser despite her strong criticism of him. From all three she derives a model of the subject that she sees as in a "sorry bind" in which one must draw one's possibilities from the very terms that condition and restrict one's life (1997a: 79). As with her analysis of the figure of the "human," she reads the conditions of subjectivity and the construction of identity as always made possible by that which

is excluded, abjected, and derealized.⁶² From Foucault, she takes an account of regimes of power-knowledge, which she often figures as norms of recognition that precede the subject and condition its formation.⁶³ From Freud, she draws an image of the “psychic” dimension of subjectivity through an account of identity formation as part of melancholic process in which identity (gender and sexuality, in particular) is constructed by a disavowal of other desires and possibilities and the inability to mourn them. Finally, Butler draws heavily from Althusser’s model of interpellation to give an account of how the subject is named and called into being. Following a certain reading of Althusser, she presents a process of subjectivation in which the subject is named by a set of interpellating norms that precede the subject and to which the subject must respond in order to be recognized as a legitimate subject. As she describes this process, “Paradoxically, the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject” (1997b: 171, emphasis in original). The process of interpellation, then, continues throughout one’s life as one attempts to navigate the field of social norms that have made one’s existence and identity possible. Take, for

⁶² As she writes of Althusser’s theory of interpellation: “We may think that to be addressed one must first be recognized, but here the Althusserian reversal of Hegel seems appropriate: the address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection” (1997b: 5). In this way, Butler’s approach to identity differs from one like William Connolly’s notion of identity\difference. For Connolly, the creation of identity always requires a marking out of difference, but unlike for Butler, this construction of difference does not necessarily constitute an realm of abjection or spectrality (see Connolly 2002).

⁶³ Contra the argument I am making in this dissertation and will develop in Chapter 4, Butler reads Foucault as indebted to the dialectical logic of Hegel’s lordship and bondage. Against readings of the figure of the master and slave as a liberation story, Butler suggests that Hegel sees the move out of bondage to the lord to a new bondage to a world of ethical norms. Thus, the subject is not set free through its “liberation” from the master. Therefore, because Foucault’s subject is never entirely free of the norms that condition its existence, Butler sees his work as developing from this Hegelian dialectic.

example, the “sexing” and “gendering” of a child through the interpellation, “It’s a girl!”. Butler describes this process as an ongoing one: “That ‘girling’ of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect” (1997b: xvii). For Butler the initial act of subjectivation that carries with it the possibility of being recognized as a “human” is both an empowering and a violating one that one must (melancholically) negotiate in terms that are never one’s own.

In many ways, this image of the subject parallels the account of alienation and the human that I have been developing in this dissertation, but there are important differences. First, though Butler recognizes that the subject gains its agency through the norms and conditions that precede it, she gives to the condition of subjectivity—being a subject—a negative valence. Being a subject is always a sorry bind for Butler because, as she argues, citing Gayatri Spivak, the act of subjectivation is “‘an enabling violation’⁶⁴ through which the “I” draws what is called its “agency” in part through being implicated in the very relations of power that it seeks to oppose” (1997b: 83). For Butler, then, the act of being interpellated may grant one agency and the possibility of “mattering,” but it likewise marks a transgression or disturbance. However, such an

⁶⁴ In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler shifts somewhat from her earlier focus on violation and guilt. There she writes, instead, of the subject’s “primary impressionability” rather than its primary vulnerability (to the “enabling violation”). See Butler (2005: esp. 77-81).but she still sees the act of subject formation as one that is “exploitable” as she did in *Psychic Life*. As I have been arguing in this dissertation, there is an important difference in how one presents this process of subject formation—either as primarily violating or enabling.

account, requires to answer the question of what or who is originally violated. Butler's account presumes a notion of a pre-subjective entity that is somehow pristine before this inaugurating violation, and it likewise suggests a mourning or longing for that prior state. In the case of the "girling" of the girl, then, Butler's account suggests that somehow there exists a body or subject that has not yet been violated. However, in the account of the human that I have been developing here, it makes more sense to suggest that the subject is called into being and then finds itself at odds with the systems of power that mark the conditions of its existence—that is, as alienated from them and from a sense of self-same identity. If there is no doer behind the deed, as Butler affirms with Nietzsche (Butler 2006a [1990]: 33; Butler 1997b: 45; Nietzsche 1989 [1887]: 45), then there can be no original violation, for there is nothing prior to the act of interpellation that could be violated or impinged. Althusser, as I will argue, provides a model of ideology and interpellation that better captures this experience of interpellation.

Second, Butler's reading of the condition of subjectivity requires her to argue that one can resist the terms of subjection only through a rejection of them and a willingness not to be recognized, which for Butler marks the move into the realm of an abject or spectral mode of being. She suggests that the subject can only resist the terms of its subjection through a process of "critical desubjection" or a "willingness not to be" in order to expose the inability of normative interpellations to saturate the scene of the human, even as we acknowledge our desire to be recognized and our complicity

in reproducing these norms (1997a: 130). This point marks a key difference from my reading of the alienated conditions of life. For the ability to resist infelicitous interpellations may require a rejection of those norms, but it does not mean that one must be undone. Instead, as Althusser suggests, it may require that we answer other interpellations present in any given social order. Butler comes closer to this position through a reading of Agamben in which she suggests that we “reread 'being' as precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation” (1997a: 131). As I argue in this chapter, Althusser’s theory of ideology and interpellation points to this very potentiality that Butler finds lacking in his account. Her misreading, I suggest, emerges from her emphasis on the vulnerability and violation in the experience of subjectivity and for her mourning for a recovery that cannot be.

Minding the Gap

Butler finds two related problems with Althusser’s account of interpellation and subjectivation. First, she identifies what a “psychic problem” in Althusser’s account: she claims that his theory of the subject fails to account for what comes prior to the act of subjectivation or what compels the subject to turn to an interpellation in the first place. Second, Butler argues that this problem leads to a pointed political problem: Althusser’s account closes off and tames the possibility of being a “bad” subject (1997a: 109), a possibility that she sees as key to the resistance and resignification of

normative structures (particularly violent ones) in general. Here I take up the psychic problem largely in terms of Butler's critique of Althusser in *The Psychic Life of Power* before turning to the political problem as she poses it in the context of *Excitable Speech*.

My reading of Butler's critique of Althusser in *Psychic Life* focuses primarily on her analysis of two important "scenes of interpellation" in Althusser's essay on ideologies.⁶⁵ First, Butler takes up Althusser's famous scene in which an officer hails a person on the street, calling out for her to turn around. For Althusser, responding to such a call constitutes an individual as a subject insofar as one recognizes herself to be the subject of that call. Indeed, as Althusser points out, the hailing, the turning, and the act of subjectivation all occur together: "These things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing...What thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology" (Althusser 2001 [1969]: 163). Second, Butler criticizes a correlative implication of this scene: the theological dimension of many of Althusser's examples of interpellation, which she finds characteristic of his theory of ideology in general.⁶⁶ Butler objects to Althusser's rendering of these scenes because, on her account, they collapse the various processes

⁶⁵ "Scenes of interpellation" are Butler's words, not Althusser's. Samuel Chambers has criticized Butler's use of this phrase for its abstraction from the "social formation" in which interpellation always takes place (Chambers 2012).

⁶⁶ These examples play an ambiguous role in Althusser's work. For while he gives these examples, he makes clear that in both cases, they should be taken as just that--*examples* of how interpellation works, which must be viewed within the larger context of his theory of ideology. For example, Althusser qualifies the case of the officer in an important way: by acknowledging the "'special' form in the practice of 'hailing' which concerns the hailing of 'suspects'" (2001 [1969]: 163, n. 18).

of subjectivation into one moment. Here Butler finds a totalizing system of ideology that provides no space for things to be otherwise. For example, Butler argues that when figured through the officer's hailing the person on the street, the process of becoming a subject/establishing an identity requires a prior complicity with the law.⁶⁷ Thus, this scheme puts anyone who would possibly resist the hail in an ambiguous position of being "undone by the critique that he or she performs" (1997a: 108).

This dilemma is only made worse, from Butler's perspective, because the dominant State ideology for Althusser requires subjects to master the State's practices through the process of their subjection to it, a process that further entraps subjects within it. She writes, "The more a practice is mastered, the more fully subjection is achieved. Submission and mastery take place simultaneously" (1997a: 116). The problem for Butler is that she wants to resist the possibility that the interpellation of State ideology can saturate the scene of subject-formation and the scene of identity to such an extreme. Thus, the prospect of such domination by the law, she suggests, represents "a theological fantasy of the law" (1997a: 130), in which the Law speaks too univocally, collapsing any space between subjects (as sites of subjectivation) and their formation through ritual, ideological practices. For Butler, with that distance goes the possibility for critique. Here Butler's reading highlights the problem of conceptualizing what comes prior to the subject, particularly if becoming subject requires some initial

⁶⁷ In *Psychic Life* Butler also claims that Althusser's scheme requires from an individual a primordial acceptance of guilt in order "to become" a subject. I have passed over this criticism for two reasons. First, Butler later reconsiders her focus on "this punitive scene of inauguration of the subject" in *Psychic Life*. See *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 15-19. Second, the implications that she draws from this scene are still clear without dwelling on the theme of guilt.

willingness to turn (1997a: 117, 124). For Butler if there is no distance (temporal, spatial, conceptual, or otherwise) between the “individual” and the processes that render it a subject, then there is no way to think that which precedes subjectivation and that which can resist it. Yet, as we will see *Althusser has an answer*—a particularly Marxian one that is unlikely to satisfy critics like Butler. He contends that that which comes prior to the subject is the concrete individual bound up in the processes of the reproduction of the relations of production (cf. 2001 [1969]: 142). That said, Butler’s critique here also points to an important aspect of the process of subject formation common to both Butler and Althusser, one that recognizes the inability to strictly parse out the temporal or genealogical relationship between the “mechanisms” of subjectivation and the subject itself (1997a: 117). Though Butler seems unsatisfied with Althusser’s use of the concrete individual as a placeholder for the pre-subjective entity (1997a: 117), she sees in this conceptual problem a place from which to begin to think the kind of liberatory project she wants to enact.⁶⁸

Though Butler does not follow Althusser in declaring that there is no outside of ideology and that we are always already subjects,⁶⁹ she does acknowledge the importance of interpellation in the creation of “the possibility of agency” (ES 26).

⁶⁸ Indeed, Butler runs up against the difficulty of giving an account of the pre-subjective in both *Psychic Life* and *Excitable Speech*. For her account she turns to a Spinozist “conative” drive for survival. Yet, Butler’s turn to the *conatus* has been criticized for its positing a pre-discursive universal desire for survival. Not only does this pre-discursive universal betray Butler’s own work to break from such categories, but it also fails her own political project by positing an pre-discursive entity seemingly immune to political intervention. See Samuel A. Chambers, *Untimely Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), Chapter 5 and Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 101-102.

⁶⁹ See her apparent disappointment that Althusser admits of “no enlightened escape from ideology” (1997a: 110).

Moreover, Butler finds some promise in pursuing the notion that the subject does indeed seek (and even enjoys) its own subjection, and it is here that Butler locates her own agenda of seeking some kind of “liberation” from ideological interpellation. Following Dolar she writes, “Dolar's suggestion that love might be 'beyond' interpellation is an important one. Althusser would have benefitted from a better understanding of how the law becomes the object of passionate attachment, a strange scene of love. For the conscience which compels the wayward pedestrian to turn around...appears to be driven by a love of the law which can be satisfied only by ritual punishment...Such love is not beyond interpellation; rather, it forms the passionate circle in which the subject becomes ensnared by its own state” (1997a: 128-129). Butler opens here another possibility for beginning to think otherwise about the nature of ideology through this appeal to passion. Passion, she argues, as prior even to the love of the Law that drives one to submit to it, necessarily exceeds interpellation and causes it to fail both “fully to constitute the subject it names” and “to determine the constitutive field of the human” (1997a: 129).

For Butler, such a passion—which both comes prior to subjection and exceeds it—is necessary for the possibility for a subject to be otherwise than what the Law demands, to be a “bad subject” (1997a: 119). She claims that Althusser’s failure to account for it (or perhaps some equivalent “drive”) causes him to elide the “bad subject” and the possibility for acting otherwise. More forcefully, this possibility, she argues, cannot exist in his system at all because the “mechanism” for subjectivation

requires the individual to turn to the Law in order to become a subject in the first place. Thus, on Butler's account of the subject, a failure or resistance to turn to the hail marks the failure of one yet "to be" a subject at all (1997a: 119), a possibility Althusser himself denies in his claim that we are always already subjects (2001 [1969]: 164). Butler ultimately attributes to Althusser's notion of subjectivity a kind of Nietzschean slave morality in which "it is better to 'be' enslaved in such a way than not to 'be' at all" (1997a: 130).

Again, Butler's argument here depends upon a dialectic of being/nonbeing that the subject must negotiate in relation to the interpellations that make its existence possible. This move keeps her tied to a model of alienation and recovery this time thought through the notion that the subject might become derealized in order to become realized anew in a more felicitous subject position. If such transformations are possible (and I believe that they are), I argue that they must happen not through a process of desubjectivation, but through the responses and challenges to the inescapable difficulty of both felicitous and infelicitous norms and forms of life. Butler's argument, again, remains caught in a version of "the Feuerbach problem" as I have described it, for this hope for a process of desubjectivation implies that one could (at least theoretically) escape the forces of subject formation in order to challenge them. However, on my reading of these conditions of subjectivity, there is no possibility for an escape from them or a recovery of a self, or even a passion, prior to the process of coming to be. We, as subjects, may find ways to respond differently to a

nexus of interpellations or hails, but it seems unlikely that we can escape them.

We can now turn more directly to the implications of Butler's reading of Althusser for the articulation of her approach to the state and state politics. In *Excitable Speech* Butler seeks to intervene in the issue of hate speech legislation, arguing that we ought not legislate the regulation of hate speech through the state because state regulation can work both to sediment the injurious quality of those words that are deemed (and indeed are) hurtful and, thus, to foreclose possibilities for resignifying such injurious speech (and for reshaping the social orders from which they arise). Legislation of the "wrong" of hate speech mistakenly links the speech with the action that it performs and thus closes the space for resignification (ES 14). For Butler this link is the result of a misconstruing of the temporality of a speech act in which a word or speech act is viewed as a singular, transitive act that creates a particular effect upon its utterance without the possibility of it acting or signifying otherwise. Against this view, she contends the following:

A 'act' is not a momentary happening, but a certain nexus of temporal horizons, the condensation of an iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions. The possibility for a speech act to resignify a prior context depend, in part, upon the gap between the originating context or intention by which an utterance is animated and the effects it produces. (ES 14)

Thus, she claims that even if a certain interpellation causes injury as it produces the subject, it also brings that subject "into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call" and "it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response" (ES 2). For Butler, then, the simultaneity of interpellation and

subjectivation in Althusser's account produces the same political problem—there is no space for the subject to act otherwise than through the previously sanctioned practices of the dominant social order. Althusser's subjection, on Butler's account, becomes “descriptive” rather than “inaugurative” in that it produces the subject through ideological recognition or identification rather than through the reiteration of norms that can create some form of agency (1997b: 33-38).

Butler's political project hinges on the capacity to hold open this “gap” between the act of interpellation and the inauguration of subjective agency. For it is only here that we can hope for “opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated” (1997b: 41). Ultimately, the success of such a project will depend on “whether the improper use of the performative can succeed in producing the effect of authority where there is no recourse to prior authorization” (1997b: 158). It is here that Butler's hope bears an important resemblance to Althusser's project, for as mentioned at the outset, the goal of his Marxist project is to create the “ideological conditions for the liberation and free development of social practices” (1990 [1976]: 265). In the rest of this chapter I give a reading of Althusser that responds to the kinds of criticisms that Butler makes; I do so in order to think a way to resist oppressive ideologies even while still admitting the impossibility of escaping from ideology in general. At times such possibilities will require the kind of critical desubjectivation that Butler suggests and at others they may involve passionate attachment to ideological practices, not as an acceptance of guilt, but as felicitous attachments and even fierce

resistance through which subjects can realize new possibilities for themselves. In the end, I hope to show that such a position, rather than foreclosing, can enhance a project like Butler's that seeks to proliferate and legitimize new possibilities for subjects and social practices, in spite of the inescapability of the terms of subjectivity that always precede and exceed us.

Multiplying Interpellations

Much of what I do in reading through Althusser in this way is simply to try to take his writing on its own terms—as an attempt to think philosophy as an ideological practice, but one that finds its purpose in working toward liberatory possibilities within a particularly Marxist framework.⁷⁰ Yet, I turn to Althusser after this reading of Butler because my rereading of Althusser finds its leverage against the kind of (mis)reading that Butler gives. Thus, to enact this reading of Althusser that identifies the conditions of state repression but also some possibility for contesting it, I will have to read Althusser against both against Butler and against himself. Althusser (much like Butler) often says one thing while describing or enacting another. Therefore, I will take up a tactic that Althusser often uses with Marx: to read him “in his limits” to see how to see how his theory extends possibilities that his own and others’ readings of his theory

⁷⁰ Althusser indicates this aim of his project in a number of his later works. For example, see (Althusser 1990 [1976]: 256) and (Althusser 1976 [1975: 200-204).

My own terms are not so committed to a Marxist worldview, but as I suggested in Chapter 1, this framework still informs much of critical work and still has much to teach us.

might seem to foreclose or to overlook.⁷¹ My reading turns on how Althusser's theory of the state overcomes its own limits to reveal a multiplicity of forms and functions operating within the apparatuses of ideology, interpellation, and the state. To do so, with Althusser I will map out the complicated relationship between ideology and the state. To describe that relationship in the starkest and most direct terms, we can say that Althusser was not seeking to overcome ideology by getting outside it; rather, he wanted to develop a theory for the overcoming of class society (and hence *repressive* ideology in the hands of a repressive state apparatus) within ideology (and its inevitability) itself. Thus, Althusser's theory of interpellation and ideology was aimed primarily at explaining the reproduction of modes of production; it was not a theory of the subject per se. Particularly in his work in the late 60's and throughout the 70's, he saw his project as one that was pushing beyond Marx's infrastructure/superstructure model (even as he continued to employ that language to some extent) that could facilitate philosophy's contribution to the overcoming of class society.⁷²

Althusser, as I indicated in Chapter 1, finds in Marx an important "refusal to root the explanation of social formations and their history in a concept of man with theoretical pretensions, that is, a concept of man as an *originating subject*" (1976

⁷¹ In a recent conversation Sam Chambers has helped me to see how this kind of "limit reading" is similar to Derrida's technique of deconstruction, which seeks to find the limits of texts to see where they deconstruct not in order to bring them down, but in order to push past those limits to see what possibilities a text holds. Drucila Cornell portrays deconstruction as "the philosophy of the limit" in a similar way in her *Philosophy of the Limit* (1992).

⁷² In an essay in which he offers a tentative look at the relationship between Althusser and Deleuze, Ted Stolze provocatively declares, "Neither Gilles Deleuze nor Louis Althusser was ever a structuralist." Stolze then goes on to begin to examine the relationship between Deleuze and Althusser particularly through their correspondence on the nature of structuralism around the time that Deleuze was writing *Difference and Repetition*. See Stolze (1998).

[1975]: 205). Butler, too, refuses such a notion of the subject, but the implications of her refusal lead to very different conclusions than for Althusser. Althusser views his anti-humanism as a means to uncover the political, class, social, and economic relations which are always already abstractions from concrete individuals, even as they “determine and brand men in their flesh and blood” (1976 [1975]: 204, 206).⁷³ Ideology, as a means for abstraction from concrete individuals, also functions as the mechanism for exploitation so long as ideology is dominated by the capitalist bourgeois (1976 [1975]: 203-204). Yet, unlike Butler in *Psychic Life*, Althusser does not locate the undoing of exploitation in the “liberation” of pre-subjective individuals.⁷⁴ Instead, Althusser’s approaches the plight of individuals as always situated within the frame of class struggle—itself bound up in the complex relations of the state and ideology. Althusser seeks to understand these state ideology relations not in order to undo them or escape them, but to challenge and unsettle the *repressive* State apparatus. For Althusser, if we always already find ourselves subjected to ideological relations that abstract from us as concrete individuals even as they condition us as such, then we cannot simply leave subjectivation behind. Herein lies the political problem for Althusser (like Butler): how can we account for the possibility of challenging these conditions without being able to escape or turn away from the

⁷³ For another reading of the relationship between ideology and anti-humanism for Althusser (and his relationship to Foucault) see Warren Montag (1995). In this essay, Montag notes the deeply paradoxical nature of Althusser’s ideology and suggests that its paradoxes causes Foucault to reject the vocabulary of ideology altogether. Yet, despite this difference, Montag notes, Foucault and Althusser draw on similar criticisms for their rejection of an original subject.

⁷⁴ Of course, as I have noted, in *Excitable Speech* (and elsewhere) Butler does not focus on such liberation either. Again, she wants to preserve the possibility/agency of a subject to be otherwise.

powers of subjectivation in general?

To begin to answer this question, we should turn briefly to Althusser's theory of ideology. Althusser takes two more important steps away from Marx in the central thesis of his theory of ideology, both of which lend themselves to some potentially "emancipatory" possibilities even without admitting an outside of ideology. First, he asserts that it is possible to hold two apparently contradictory positions concerning ideology: ideology in general has no history while ideologies in particular do have a history. Concerning the former, Althusser on the one hand accepts Marx's claim in *The German Ideology* that ideology is pure illusion and that "all its reality is external to it" (2001 [1969]: 150). On the other hand, he inverts the negative sense of the claim that all reality/history is external to ideology by asserting that ideology is only a-historical to the extent that it is "an *omni-historical*" reality (2001 [1969]: 151). Yet, Althusser resists the claim that ideology can, thus, be transcendent to history; instead, he asserts that ideology has no history insofar as it is omnipresent throughout history, always existing in the same form (2001 [1969]: 152). Thus, he can assert that ideologies in particular are historical as they take on different forms throughout the history of class struggle, even as they exist under the form/structure of ideology in general. Further, the forms that ideology in general will take cannot be determined in advance—they are manifested materially through the particular forms of ideologies in particular.

Althusser then seeks to modify Marx's theory that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (2001

[1969]: 153). Again, he insists on maintaining this traditional Marxist perspective on ideology, while attempting to move in a more materialist, historical direction. Here he argues that we must understand the imaginary not as an ideational construct, but as a material one in which ideology is manifested in particular actions, practices, and rituals within ideological apparatuses. Thus, "Ideology has a material existence" (2001 [1969]: 155). For Althusser, ideology represents the relations of our existence in an imaginary way only insofar as these relations are conditioned by practices within particular ideologies and ideological apparatuses. Yet, because we can only know those "real relations" through ideological practices, it seems that the real relations exist only as a placeholder, much like Althusser's "concrete individual." Again, through these moves Althusser is trying to create a space in which he can posit an "anti-humanist" reading of Marx that continues to reveal the real, material effects of ideology/ideologies in the lives of "'individuals' who live in ideology" (2001 [1969]: 156). In this light his use of Pascal's "kneel and pray" example now takes on a new force, for the subject who enacts the ritual whether motivated (or compelled) from within or without is in reality impacted by the ritual practice, even if the ideology of the Church (or any other ideological apparatus) presents "only" an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence. Here the imaginary and the real cannot be rendered as a dichotomy because they always retain a relation to one another and often blur into one another.

Further, by separating ideologies from ideology Althusser can show how some

ideologies remain outside the dominating reach of the state, allowing for their mobilization by repressed classes in the class struggle. First, as I have been arguing, Althusser insists that there are multiple dominant (and, we must assume, repressed) ideological apparatuses which function as sites of the class struggle. The state rarely, if ever, has the power to unify these ideologies for its own ends. Second, Althusser claims that the subject of ideology and ideology itself are co-constitutive, a formulation that resists models that posit ideology as a totalizing field of subjectivation. For instance, in the case of Pascal's potential believer, an ideology "needs" the subject to recognize its call as much as the subject "needs" the ideology to call out to him. Finally, he makes a distinction between repressive ideologies of the state from the various ideologies that function in other capacities throughout our lives. Herein lies the key point for this discussion: we are multiple subjects, subjected to a multitude of ideological practices. Both ideologies and we (as their subjects) are embodied in material practices, ranging from religion to education to family roles to economic practices. Further, despite the fact that Althusser argues that ideology is ineluctable and we are always already interpellated subjects, he also admits some reflexivity between ideologies and their subjects. In fact, he suggests that there is a "double constitution" of ideologies and their subjects—that is, ideologies need subjects to answer their calls, a provocative claim that seems to open the possibility for our ability to refuse some calls in favor of others and for ideologies to fade away (2001 [1969]: 160). Thus, contra Butler, we can see that failing to respond to a hail might undo not just the

individual's being as subject, but also the integrity of a particular ideology itself. For if those subjected to repressive ideology are to resist it, the possibilities for resistance for Althusser must be found within ideology—where those very individuals find themselves—not outside it or in their own undoing. Indeed, Althusser himself offers such a possibility in his use of the example of God as “the Subject *par excellence*” (2001 [1969]: 167). He writes, “As all theological reflection proves, whereas 'He' could perfectly have done well without men, God needs them, the Subject needs the subjects, just as men need God, the subjects need the Subject. Better: God needs men, the great Subject needs subjects” (2001 [1969]: 167).

This example offers a way for us to think beyond a model of ideology and subjection as totalizing and always repressive, for insofar as that which calls us depends upon our response, we see that we might resist it and allow *it* to wither, rather than ceasing to be ourselves. To highlight particular ideologies as contingent upon our response to them makes possible an understanding of positive response to interpellations as part of the subject's choice to heed some calls and not others—much like Butler's notion of a passion that causes us to seek our own subjection. Thus, the importance of Althusser's insistence on the existence of multiple forms or modes of ideologies becomes most clear: for individual subjects to become otherwise than oppressed, they must be able to turn to more felicitous forms of ideologies not in which they are forced to answer the call, but in which they might more happily recognize themselves. Here we can begin to see how Althusser's position does allow

for the kind of agency in subjection that Butler thinks it forecloses. Indeed, Althusser locates the site of subjectivation and the inception of agency at the point of confluence of various ideologies. He sums up this position in the following:

The interpellation of the individual as subject, which makes him an ideological subject, is realized not on the basis of a *single* ideology, but of *several ideologies* at once. Such ideologies ["local," "regional," "national"] are initially inherited from the past, the tradition. What results is a *play and a space* of multiple interpellations in which the subject is caught up, but which (as contradictory play and as space) constitutes the 'freedom' of the individual subject, who is *simultaneously* interpellated by several ideologies. (2006 [1986]: 241, brackets in the translated text)

This play and space that makes agency possible functions for Althusser like the "social place" that is created by interpellation and that makes performativity possible for Butler. Moreover, because ideologies and their interpellations are multiple and none is ever totally dominant, subjection can always happen otherwise, opening space for creative, rather than reactive, critique in responses to some calls rather than others. As Althusser continues, "This multiplicity explains the '*free*' *development of the positions adopted by the subject-individual*. Thus the individual has at his disposal a 'play of manoeuvre' [*jeu de manoeuvre*] between several positions, between which he can 'develop', or even, if you insist, 'choose', determine his course [*se determiner*]" (2006 [1986]: 241, brackets and French spellings in translated text).

Thus, from this perspective, to answer "Yes, it really is I" to the hail of an ideology is an expression of who I understand (or wish) myself to be, rather than a turning against myself from the start. Thus, the possibility of our turning (or not) to the

call of various ideologies shapes them as much as it does us, for though they are “initially inherited” from tradition, ideologies become otherwise as they are taken up by subjects. A refusal to answer might provoke a more violent response from an ISA or directly from an RSA, but it also marks a turn toward the undoing of such repression in favor of more positively appealing ideologies. Overall, this perspective begins to relieve some of our anxiety about ideology in general as we see that it only becomes manifest in *particular* instances as ideologies, which are always contestable and are, under some conditions, able to be ignored.⁷⁵

However, I must also identify potential pitfalls in emphasizing too strongly the possibilities for subjects’ self-determination. First, Althusser does qualify the extent to which the subject is constitutive of ideology: “The category of the subject is only constitutive of ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subject” (2001 [1969]: 160). And, importantly, we are “*always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition” (2001 [1969]: 161). Second, it may seem that to focus on an individual subject’s ability to resist unhappy interpellations in favor of others is almost to lose sight of Althusser’s specifically Marxist project. We must remember that for Althusser the focus remains on the class struggle and the conditions for the reproduction of the relations of production. For Althusser “the reality in question in this mechanism [of subjectivation], the reality which is necessarily *ignored* in the very

⁷⁵ Butler, too, points to the potential of multiple ideologies and interpellations, but again she emphasizes the violating aspects of these of these interpellations, seeing them as multiple sites of violation (Butler 2011 [1993]).

forms of recognition is indeed, in the last resort, the reproduction of the relations of production and of the relations deriving from them" (2001 [1969]: 170). Ideologies are "*realized* in institutions, in their rituals and their practices, in the ISAs" which are in turn installed through the domination of the ruling class in the context of class struggle over control of State power and its attendant apparatus.

Given this account, it may seem strange to turn to Althusser to address the question of how the violent and repressive aspects of the modern state may be mitigated through both more traditional and more radical forms of political action. Althusser's theory of the state seems to reify a monolithic image of the state, reducing it to one set of functions that foreclose the possibility of finding in state politics any approach to the problems of social and political harm. Althusser often presents the state monolithically as a "class state" that has one primary function: to produce power for the domination of the dominant class over the working class (2006 [1994]: 106). Thus, the basic nature of the state for Althusser is repression and exploitation. Further, for Althusser the state is separate from society (and the class struggle) and must remain separate as a tool for the bourgeois to enact this repression (2006 [1994]: 77).⁷⁶ On their face, these characterizations mark the state as inextricably bound up with violence (and not just constitutive or structural violence, but the active violence of policing and repression), and thus thwart any attempt to find relief from it except

⁷⁶ As Althusser conceives it, a tool or instrument must remain separate from its user in order to be an object of its use, in the way that a hammer as a instrument can separate from the hammerer. Thus, the bourgeois, even as the master user of the state, remain vulnerable to it insofar as it remains separate. (cf. 2006 [1994]: 69)

through the revolutionary overthrow of the state by the repressed. So, Althusser's characterization of the state as violent and repressive is not one that can be blithely set aside.

Yet, even here where the focus is shifted from the individual subject to the class struggle, the ideologies remain crucial sites of the political struggle that challenges the dominance of any apparatus, including the state. As Althusser notes, the ideologies that the dominant class installs over the oppressed, as well as the ideologies that the repressed might use against the State, always exceed them because of the transhistorical character of ideology in general (2001 [1969]: 172). Thus, as Althusser writes, the struggle over ideology must always be seen from the perspective of class struggle, "Ideologies are not 'born' in the ISAs but from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experience of the struggle, etc." (2001 [1969]: 173). Though individuals in this scheme are partially obscured in the class struggle, their particular actions in relation to ideology (through the larger mechanisms of the history of class struggle) are constitutive of it.

Disentangling the State

To resist the tendency to see the ideologies as always under the control of a repressive state, Althusser attempts both to modify and to develop Marxian theories of the state by distinguishing between state power and the repressive state apparatus. In the ISA's essay, Althusser attempts to move beyond what he calls Marx's "descriptive

theory” of the State because he finds in it only the *beginning* of an understanding of the repressive State apparatus. Here he makes an important distinction between the State apparatus, which “may survive political events which affect the possession of State power,” and State power itself, which must be the focus of class struggle (2001 [1969]: 134). This distinction provides a clue to how the proletariat (or any repressed class) might hold State power even as they work to undo the State apparatus. Althusser wants to allow the possibility of one (State power) without the other (an RSA). Next, he posits the notion of Ideological State Apparatuses as another attempt to move beyond the “descriptive” theory of Marx (2001 [1969]: 132). The introduction of ISA's is significant because they provide another site within and sometimes beyond the state apparatus for thinking the class struggle as well as the reproduction of the relations of production. Moreover, they provide a theoretical distinction that identifies the multiple ways that the ruling class functions and through which the ruling class could be challenged. For Althusser, an RSA functions primarily (though not exclusively) by violence through repression, whereas an ISA functions by ideology that may or may not be repressive (2001 [1969]: 138). ISA's become repressive to the extent that they are controlled by the ruling classes and implemented for the means of conserving the State power of a repressive State apparatus.

This distinction allows Althusser to respond to a twofold burden that is placed on a Marxist theory of State repression that understands the State as exploitative from the start. First, there is the question of how one can think any ameliorative, much less

revolutionary, potential within such a system, particularly once the dream of a recovery of the species-being has been given up.⁷⁷ Second, there is a question of how, if the repressed class(es) were to take to control of state power, they could successfully dissolve the repressive state power. For Althusser, the state functions in various way: as an instrument, an apparatus, and a machine. From the point of view of that the state as an instrument, it is an entity or tool used by the dominant class to establish domination over the other classes (2006 [1994]: 70). Viewed as an apparatus, it is composed of components—both ideological and repressive—that act as a machine or in a machinic⁷⁸ mode that facilitates the state’s action of dominating the other classes (2006 [1994]: 69). Finally, as a machine, the state converts one kind of work or force into another as a machine that both runs on the energy and forces produced in class conflict and converts these forces into the legal power that it uses to maintain the dominance of the ruling class (2006 [1994]: 108). According to Althusser, the state, which is in the “possession” of the dominant class, acts like a machine that transforms the never-ending excess of forces produced through class struggle in order to attempt to maintain some kind of balance of power that keeps the dominant class in control of the machine. As he describes it, *“What counts is the dynamic excess of force*

⁷⁷ Althusser rejects this humanist dream of the pre-1845 writings of Marx because he argues both that Marx made a decisive break from this humanist perspective and that this break makes an enormous impact on the political effects of Marxist theory in moving from the abstraction of the species being to the concrete analysis of the contemporary social formation.

⁷⁸ I take this notion of the machinic from Deleuze and Guattari. They use the term to try to capture the sense in which an apparatus can act as a machine as an assemblage of heterogeneous parts that come together to function in a particular way. They invoke the term “machinic” however to distinguish this functioning from the functioning of a mechanical machine that produces certain pre-determined outputs based upon certain pre-determined inputs. The machinic is neither designed nor fully predictable (cf. 1987 [1980]: 79).

maintained by the dominant class in the class struggle. It is *this excess of conflictual force, real or potential, which constitutes energy A*, which is subsequently transformed into power by the state-machine: *transformed into rights, laws, and norms*" (2006 [1994]: 109, emphasis in original).

To take an example, consider disputes over the working day that Marx often discusses in relation to the notion of surplus value. An Althusserian reading sees the conflicts over the working day as productive of a certain kind of political energy that challenges the power of the state (under the control of the bourgeois). Such conflict would seem to challenge the hegemony of the state, but insofar as the state is an effective machine for converting or domesticating this energy by channeling it into "legitimate" forms of rights, laws, and norms, it is able to maintain (and tighten) control. Thus, in the example, if the state apparatus is able to meet the demands of the workers through the granting of rights or other concessions, it not only maintains control, but also strengthens its power through the production of laws that makes it easier for it to transfer/process the ongoing energies of the class struggle. For these rights, laws, and norms become part of the apparatus of government allowing it to extend its reach over various social roles. We can begin to see, then, that the modern state accrues potentially repressive power not only by traditionally repressive means, but by the capture and conversion of political energies into manageable political forms that help determine the roles and activities of its subjects.

Yet, the contrast between ISA's and RSA's allows Althusser to open a space for

seeing the multiplicity of sites of class struggle, rather than a unilateral application of repressive power through ideology and interpellation. For whereas the dominant ISA tends to be viewed as unitary or monolithic, ISA's are multiple. Althusser gives many examples of this multiplicity ranging from schools to family to cultural institutions (2001 [1969]:137). The plurality of ideologies suggests an important distinction between ISA's and ideology in general and will provide a site for the 'agency' of the subject. For though ISA's tend to function under the ideology of the ruling class, they do not necessarily do so (2001 [1969]: 139). Thus, the multiplicity of ideologies seems to proliferate sites for subjects to act outside of state control. Moreover, the process of establishing a *dominant* ideology takes a long time (1009 [1976]: 258). More radically, in his correspondence with Fernanda Navarro, Althusser writes the following:

Historical periods marked by a dominant ideology that is truly one and truly unified is rare...It would be preferable to speak in terms of the (contradictory) tendency of an ideology which seeks to constitute itself as a (non-contradictory) *unity* and aspires to domination over ideological elements inherited from the past, elements which it never succeeds in truly *unifying* as a unique, dominant ideology. (2006 [1994]: 239, emphasis in original)

Therefore, even as the ISA's seem to be almost inextricably bound up in the repressive actions of the SA, Althusser maintains that the ISA's become a site of class struggle where the repressed classes can find an effective ground for contesting them.

Althusser's uses as his key example here the Church, which was the site of an ideological class struggle not only through the Reformation, but also as a target in the French Revolution (2001 [1969]: 143-144), which demonstrates how a dominant ISA

is contested both ideologically through the Reformation and physically through the violence of war. Thus, we begin to see an Althusserian response to a critique like Butler's: ideology and the practices of interpellation are not in themselves repressive or violating and need not be applied repressively. Ideology gains its repressive character through the enactment of particular ideologies *over time* under a repressive state or social apparatus that always remains contradictory to some extent. As Butler recognizes, not all names are unhappy to answer to.

On this account, the state is not identical with nor reducible to its apparatuses (repressive or ideological). Nor can the state be identified with any abstracted notion of state power disembodied from its apparatus. Instead, the state seems to be an entity that is the effect of the convergence of these forces and apparatuses. But even as an effect it still has a very real existence. That said, the actual body of the state is one of the most paradoxical elements of Althusser's account of the state. For though the state seeks to remain separate from the class struggle, the body of the state is made up of the very elements of that struggle and the relations of production that keep that struggle moving. The state and the class struggle are composed of "men, weapons, techniques and practices, buildings and land as well, and all the instruments required to ensure their functioning. But, *first and foremost, it is men*" (2006 [1994]: 111). Because the body of the state is made up of the very people that it functions to exploit and repress, it must work even harder to repress or neutralize the fact of their class origin through the ISA's (2006 [1994]: 113). Yet, the contrast between ISA's and RSA's allows

Althusser to open a space for multiplying the sites of political struggle outside of the apparatuses of the state that are typically associated with the the primarily repressive apparatuses of militaries, police, bureaucracies, etc. For the various ideologies that make up and exceed the ISA's can become sites of contestation themselves.

The Encounter of Politics

Althusser developed a model for thinking the political possibilities for this theoretical approach through his work on his notion of “the encounter” of aleatory materialism, as contained in his reading of Machiavelli. Though I have noted that this project may be fraught with uncertainty I want to add to his project by considering the state as an important site for the amelioration of social wrongs,. Indeed, one way to understand Althusser's turn to the aleatory is through the difficulties of reading history and politics through his Marxist perspective.⁷⁹ Indeed, a theory of overcoming repressive ideologies is conditioned by a certain impossibility. This uncertainty in Althusser marks an important connection back to the kind of concern that Butler (and others) share about the prospects for potentially enacting or resisting interpellation and subjectivation. The act of subjectivation—whether undertaken by the potential “believer” in Pascal's example or imposed by a (potentially) repressive ideology—always remains uncertain from the start and requires a kind of faith on both sides that

⁷⁹ Althusser proved himself to be a bad reader of the possibilities for social revolution in his denunciation of the '68 riots. This reading of Althusser is not meant to be an apology for his (rather conservative) action at that point. Instead, as I suggested at the beginning of the chapter, my reading of Althusser attempts to read him “at his limits,” which can often mean reading against him.

things will turn out in the desired way. As Butler claims, “We must neither first believe before we kneel nor know the sense of words before we speak. On the contrary, both are performed ‘on faith’ that sense will arrive in and through articulation itself” (1997a: 124). Perhaps we can only know our prior desire or passion for interpellation in how we find that we have answered it. The question, then, is acute: how might a new political formation as a response to previous wrongs actually come about?

Althusser articulates this problem in his reading of Machiavelli’s attempt to establish the political project of the New Prince. His reading of Machiavelli speaks directly to the political problem that he and Butler pose. Althusser locates in the figure of the New Prince an “aleatory space” for the enactment of a new political act (2001 [1995]: 20-21). That is, the New Prince figures as the possibility of a new political ideology or interpellation made possible from the “play and space” of the multiple ideologies and interpellations already at work within the social and political world.⁸⁰ In these terms, the figure of the Prince seem to directly echo Butler’s conception of the function of a political ‘act’ in *Excitable Speech*, quoted above as “a certain nexus of temporal horizons, the condensation of an iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions” (1997b: 14). Indeed, Althusser is working, in his own terms, on a question like one that Butler poses in *Excitable Speech*: how we might “succeed in producing the effect of authority where there is no recourse to prior authorization” (1997b: 158). For Althusser, success will require an encounter between the New Prince who issues a

⁸⁰ Following Stephen Gill, Adam Holden and Stuart Elden describe this New Prince “as a plural and differentiated ‘set of potentials’” (Holden and Elden 2005: 27).

new call, a new interpellation to which a people will respond. This project always remains uncertain; for “the Prince is a pure aleatory possibility...an individual indefinable in advance” (2001 [1995]: 26-27), for there is no historical necessity for his arising (2001 [1995]: 26) and there is no guarantee that his call will bring people to respond. For example, we can think of the emergence of new rights claims as an aleatory moment that potentially calls into being political subjects to identify with and take up the terms of the rights claim (or not).⁸¹

The encounter enacts the play of *virtu* and *fortuna* where the possibility of a new political space requires both the skill of the political agent and a set of felicitous circumstances for the action or call to endure. The success (Althusser might even say the very *existence*) of the New Prince instead depends upon his ability to project a new possibility for interpellation/subjectivation that will appeal to existing individuals/subjects as more felicitous subject positions. For only in the material enactment of an ideological interpellation can we see its effects. According to Althusser, Machiavelli “hails us from a place that he summons us to occupy as potential ‘subjects’ (agents) of a potential political practice” (2001 [1995]: 32). We must be able to recognize ourselves as potential occupiers of that space – its sustained existence depends on our subjecting ourselves to it interpellation. Both the particular ideology as political practice and its potential subjects rise and/or fall together in a particular historical/political conjuncture. Its success will be determined by its ability

⁸¹ William E. Connolly discusses in a related way the emergence of new rights as a kind of encounter in his *Ethos of Pluraliztion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 178-188.

to appeal to individuals who may or may not answer the call. Ultimately, in Althusser's reading of Machiavelli, the ideology of this New Prince, even as it functions as a state ideology, will no longer be repressive, but will instead function as a regulatory ideal for the people.

The turn to the aleatory finally gets to a crucial point in how we can think resistance to repressive powers—be they SA's, ISA's, or ideology in general. On the one hand, such a turn reveals the contingency that conditions both existing and potential forms of identity, subjectivity, community, as well as the alienation that we experience there. On the other, it highlights the *potential* itself—not just that we can find new ways for identifying ourselves and living together, but also that we can find that some modes of subjectivation that function repressively now need not be seen as inherently so. Althusser presents a way of thinking such possibilities and shows us that maintaining a robust theoretical/political framework need not undermine attempts to overcome current forms of social repression and inequality. In fact, an approach that works critically within such a framework may provide as many possibilities for resisting repression as one that seeks to imagine new possibilities outside/beyond any “structural” framework at all.

In closing, I would like to offer an example in order to make this point more concrete. In the last episode of the network television show *Boston Legal*, the character Denny Crane, who is a rich partner of the law firm in the show and who has fallen into some trouble for his behavior as he begins to succumb to Alzheimer's disease, asks his

best friend and law partner, Alan Shore, to marry him. His reasons for asking him are many and complex, and they do clearly involve the legal privileges provided by marriage: Denny wants to be able to give Alan all of his money when he dies without being taxed by the state. He also wants the legal protection that Alan will not be able to testify against him (because of spousal privileges) if he gets into any more trouble because of his condition. But there is another matter as well: Denny tells Alan that he always wanted to get married again before he slips too far into Alzheimer's, and as he says to Alan, "Like it or not, you're the man I love."⁸² Alan accepts, and what follows is an interesting legal battle in which a local LGBT group seeks an injunction against the marriage on the grounds that the couple only wants to get married for monetary reasons. The judge rules for the couple both chastising the plaintiff for reinforcing the arguments against gay marriage that made it illegal for so long in Massachusetts and arguing that the state has no right to question why a couple, who is legally eligible, chooses to seek marriage.

This example provides a very complex relationship to the argument that I have been trying to make here. On the one hand, one could rightly argue that such a case reveals the way in which certain important privileges, like inheritance rights and some cases of legal immunity, remain bound to a particular set of state-sanctioned social arrangements. On the other hand, from the perspective I have been developing, we can also read this example as an outcome of rights-granting that none of the parties involved in the battle of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts ever expected. In opening

⁸² <http://popwatch.ew.com/2008/12/09/boston-legal-1/>. Accessed 02/26/2010.

up the possibility for same-sex marriage, other possibilities for kinship relations within the state were also unlocked (even if only realized fictionally—so far as we know) through two characters on television. New interpellations have been issued that individuals may or may not take up as felicitous subject positions and that can shift our perception and our practices regarding marriage, love, friendship, and even rights in general. In this way, a new right can actually loosen the hold the state has over a range of social practices, even as it appears to more fully capture another form of social relationship. Of course, such felicitous outcomes are never guaranteed. Such are the experiences of alienation that make up a human life marked by friendship, unequal privilege, exclusive rights that both include and marginalize us, and so on. My claim here is only that making claims for identity-based rights can change our (ideological) practices beyond the repressive mechanisms of the state and dominant normative orders even as such claims must pass through these orders to achieve their ends. The state and dominant normative orders remain important sites for political contestation. Of course, appealing to the state for amelioration of social injuries remains a risky practice; it carries no guarantee that such claims will either relieve or reinforce the uncertainties, inequalities, and alienations of our social lives.

Warming Up to the Cold Monster

The Trouble with Marriage/The Problem of the State

To begin this chapter I want explore with the issue of same-sex marriage for a moment longer. I remain here with the “problem” of same-sex marriage because, for more than two decades, the debate over the desirability and possibility of legal same-sex marriage has been a nodal point for contentions over the political and theoretical stakes of feminist and queer theory and because the issue of marriage so clearly highlights the dilemmas and alienation of life in the late modern neoliberal state regime. Public debate over same-sex marriage has revealed implications of marriage beyond the more straightforward question of the extension of civil rights and have fueled discussions about the relationship between the state, marriage, and the problems of immigration, family, patriarchy, church-state relations, and so on. At the heart of these debates, then, has been the question of the role of the state in ameliorating or reinforcing exclusive norms, practices, and protections. At the risk of caricature, I contend that these debates over the character and role of the state have too often ossified into a false choice between a smooth story of liberal progression or a disquieting story of the growing hegemony of the state and heteronormativity.⁸³ My

⁸³ This “problem” of the state is not, of course, anything particularly new. The question of reform or revolution has always been part of Marxian and other left critical theories (cf. *The King of Prussia*). Georg Lukács captured this dynamic well in *History and Class Consciousness* in which he identified the false choice between the “opportunism” of legality and the “romanticism of illegality” (1971 [1968]: 256).

argument in this chapter is that such approaches to the problem of the state and power of norms are insufficient for the alienated conditions of late modern life and both risk positing an impossible solution to these conditions. In making this argument, I consider the state and its potential both to enhance and to inhibit efforts to deal with the alienations of contemporary life, and I argue for a theoretical approach that resists the tendency of critical thought to find the answer to such dilemmas only in their overcoming. With these issues in mind, I first want to turn to a personal anecdote to illuminate some of these contemporary dilemmas so starkly highlighted in the problem of marriage.

Last year two friends of mine asked if I would be willing to be the officiant for the signing of their marriage certificate. In order to be recognized by the state as an officiant, I had to be ordained, so I visited the website for American Marriage Ministries and became “official” with a few clicks of the mouse. These friends are an opposite-sex couple who had never planned nor wanted to be officially married, but they needed to get married for the typical reasons that immigration presses onto people: to be recognized by the state as a legitimate couple in order to be granted to permission for both of them to stay in the country while one of them pursued a job opportunity. The situation is an unfortunately familiar one and embodies the dilemmas of living in late (neo)liberal state capitalism and of acceding to the demands of the neoliberal state. These dilemmas were heightened further in this case as the couple found themselves asking a gay man and his partner, who themselves were barred from

legal marriage at the time, to take up the duties of marrying them into an institution they only entered under the coercion of the promise of bureaucratic privileges. We agreed because we wanted their relationship and their legal status to be secure in this country. Yet, because we all felt some reluctance about the institution of marriage, we wanted to make the day meaningful beyond the state-bureaucratic actions of the signing of documents and somehow transgressive of the heterosexual limitations of the institution. So, we put together a ceremony that involved drag, a collection of religious icons (though none of us is particularly religious), a cutout of Karl Marx, poetry that mocked family values, and statements of conscience. In the end, though, the marriage still required that I sign the state documents verifying that the man and woman whose names were printed on the page were not related by blood as far as I know, that they had agreed to be married, and that I had the legal standing to marry them by the authority of the non-denominational ministry I had joined two days before. Now that gay marriage has since been legalized in many states (and is recognized by the federal government), my partner and I face the same pressures our friends once faced—whether to enter into an institution that seems to reinforce both the state’s ability to regulate the legitimacy of forms of association and that upholds the heteronormative model of kinship—now just made more widely available.

This story highlights (at an admittedly personal and small-scale level) the difficulties of negotiating the power and privilege of the state and normative definitions of sexual identity, desire, and kinship. It puts on stark display some of the alienated

conditions of contemporary life: our friends' alienation from the demands of marriage, our alienation from the institutional protections that they were seeking, our collective alienation from our intentions to transgress the normalizing power of marriage even as they entered into it. Yet, a decade ago the terms of the debate over same-sex marriage and its relation to both the state and heteronormativity seemed to be more clearly drawn. On one side we had Michael Warner's powerful argument warning us about the power of normalization to reinforce heteronormative models of relationships and strengthen lines of exclusions (Warner 1999). The call was to reject marriage for the sake of preserving the queerness of non-heteronormative relationships against the normalizing forces of these social and political practices. Warner's argument remains powerful and difficult to deny as we have continued to see the intransigence of masculinist, heteronormative structures in our domestic and foreign policies, our social lives, and the military, in spite of recent gains in marriage rights for same-sex couples. Yet, for many of us, Warner's critique has become more difficult to insist upon as marriage rights are beginning to be made more widely available, especially as we see basic decencies like hospital visitation, medical power of attorney, and the tax-free inheritance of common property being extended (to many, but not to all) through the institution of marriage. Certainly there persists a strong argument against these privileges being tied to marriage in the first place, but the issue has become more difficult to parse as the political landscape has shifted. On the other side, we had Andrew Sullivan's more triumphalist argument that universal approval of same-sex

marriage would be the key to full inclusion of gays and lesbians into the body politic (Sullivan 1989 and 1995). Though it might be tempting to suggest that Sullivan seems to be proven right by the dramatic shift in attitudes toward gays and lesbians, the rise in anti-gay hate crimes, the ongoing debate over protections for transgendered persons, and the persistence of misogyny and gender discrimination at all levels of society make it likewise difficult to make a hard case for this more conventional liberal progressive view.

To explore this kind of dialectic between a politics of rights or their rejection, I first turn to Eve Sedgwick's critique of the tendency of critical thought to turn into "strong theory" that moves toward totalizing approaches to a given problematic and risks foreclosing the possibility or viability of a more subtle take (or a multiplicity of takes), and thus, limits the possibilities of the project of critical theory. Following Sedgwick, I argue that strong theory is most effectively challenged not by a competing strong theory, but by the production of "weak" alternatives that attempt to multiply possibilities rather than produce universalizing criticism. To demonstrate this position, I turn to two perhaps unlikely sources—Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari. I call them unlikely sources because their work has often been taken up as resources for strong (and often paranoid) theories of the state, as a source primarily of repression and of the propagation of capitalism. Yet, as I read both of them, while offering a criticism of the repressive conditions of state and capitalism, they employ a "strategic" or anticipatory position that addresses specific conditions of the contemporary conjuncture rather than

producing a strong or universal theory of the state or capitalism. At stake here is the question of whether critical theory can be employed to produce a weak theory of the state that is more appropriate to our contemporary condition, for the challenges of our current conjuncture can not be captured by the promises of strong theory. Likewise, the dilemmas of life in neoliberal state capitalism cannot be ameliorated through the project of reform or revolution alone. Pursuing a weak theory of the state and state politics, helps hold open the question of whether and how the state contributes to the propagation of exclusive norms and privileges or to their amelioration. This approach might, too, help us see more clearly whether in the marriage scene above anything happened in the end besides the reinforcement of the hegemony of the state over legitimate and illegitimate forms of association and the possibilities of state recognition. Put bluntly, did these private acts of transgression amount to anything other than an attempt to add a dose of sugar to the swallowing of a bitter pill?

Strong Readings and Paranoid Politics

Both sides of the dialectic of a progressivist or more radical approach to the state (and marriage) doubtless capture powerful aspects of the dynamic of the norms and conditions of state power. Yet, the trouble with such arguments, I suggest, is that they tend toward what Sedgwick, following Silvan Tomkins, calls “strong theory” (Sedgwick 2003). With Tomkins, Sedgwick defines a strong theory by the “size and topology of the domain that it organizes” (2003: 133). Strong theories become

problematic not because they are ineffective in explaining and ordering their “domain” nor because they are simply too general. Instead, strong theories “grow to be only too effective” as they capture and organize all aspects of a dynamic into a unified whole that limits (or may even eliminate) the possibilities of seeing things otherwise. In the example of Warner and Sullivan above we can see how their positions could employ a version of strong theory in analyzing the case of marriage with which I began. From a position like Warner’s we could read the case simply as a reinforcement of heteronorms; from a position like Sullivan’s we could focus on the expansion of marriage rights to same-sex couples at the state and federal level as evidence of the almost inevitable march toward full recognition and equality.

Sedgwick’s (and my) point in introducing the idea of strong theory here is more than marking the more or less obvious intractability of liberal and non-liberal political thought—or what Horkheimer calls traditional and critical theory (1975 [1937]). Instead, Sedgwick’s argument for a distinction between strong and weak readings emerges from a reaction to the dominance of what she calls the “paranoid” position in left critical thought. For Sedgwick this paranoid position has emerged from the privileging within critical theory of the methods of hermeneutics of suspicion (cf. Ricoeur 1970) and of demystification as a promise of escape from repressive forms of power.⁸⁴ We see this kind of paranoid reading in Butler’s theory of the conditions of subjectivity that, on her reading, while enabling, are also violating. Sedgwick argues

⁸⁴ With this argument, Sedgwick joins a growing list of thinkers challenging this approach to the project of critical theory, including Bruno Latour (2003), Jacques Rancière (2009), Jane Bennett (2010), and Sam Chambers (2013). I will turn to this discussion later in this chapter.

that this kind of paranoid position can become a strong theory of the worst kind when it excludes the validity of anything but a suspicious reading. The imperative to employ suspicion and paranoia stems from a presumed faith amongst critical theorists that to expose structural inequality, violence, and oppression necessarily lead to political action to counter such practices. Yet, as Sedgwick suggests, “for someone to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systematic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences” (2003: 124).⁸⁵

The paranoid position endures, however, through what it promises as a method. As a strong theory, paranoid reading becomes self-reflexive and self-reinforcing to the point of allowing, for instance, for the “paranoid” theorist to uncover violence and oppression in almost any instance of political and social life. As a method, Sedgwick then argues, paranoid readings can become both self-reflexive and mimetic, making it all the more effective and teachable (2003: 143).⁸⁶ The advancing imperative of the paranoid position, then, brings with it the presumption that “to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to be seen as naïve, pious, or complaisant”

⁸⁵ Sedgwick’s argument recalls Bersani’s argument that we tend to draw a fallacious connection between someone’s sexual orientation and their political orientation. See Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ This mimetic quality can be seen in the way that Foucault’s concepts of biopolitics and governmentality have been taken up and applied to almost every imaginable condition that is marked by the state and its relationship to the body. See, for instance, *Beyond Biopolitics* (Clough and Willse: 2011) that extends the reach of biopolitics as much as it works to get beyond it. Likewise, Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life (as a reading of biopolitics) has become too easily applied to any condition of oppression. Here see João Biehl’s *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005), in which he reads communities like that of Vita as the equivalent of bare life in “the camp.” My point is not to overlook the suffering of those in the camp. Instead, I want to highlight the way that such readings overlook the ways that people in the camp have set up their own forms of community and resistance in order to survive (and more) there.

(2003: 126).⁸⁷ Under these conditions, the paranoid position of critical theory becomes hegemonic in a way that parallels the hegemony of the structures that the paranoid reading is meant to undermine. For Sedgwick the real trouble with this development in critical theory is that it circumscribes the potential for other interpretive methods that might offer alternative modes of political struggle.⁸⁸ As Sedgwick puts it, the critical tools that were born from the tools of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” have had “an unintentionally stultifying side effect: they may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” (2003: 124).⁸⁹ In other words, as a strong theory, the paranoid reading tends to foreclose the possibility that the theorists will see other, non-negative or dangerous, affects and phenomena within a given problematic, and thus obscure, rather than illuminate, the multiple and contingent elements with a given problematic, scene, or social order. To again return to the marriage scene, a paranoid reading may miss the

⁸⁷ cf. Jodi Dean’s *The Communist Horizon* (2012).

⁸⁸ Sedgwick herself is interested in the possibility of reparative readings that would not be considered “mere” repair in the face of the serious work of paranoid readings. There has been something of a turn to the reparative in political and critical theory since the time of *Touching Feeling*. Such readings are important for offering alternatives to the paranoid approach. There are, of course, dangers in this direction as well. For one risks glorifying mundane practices (cf. James Scott 1990) or even practices that reinforce gender inequality and oppression (cf. Saba Mahmood 2005) in the search for everyday forms of resistance.

⁸⁹ It is important to note that Sedgwick’s tone in this essay is a bit conflicted. She recognizes that the project of demystification has been effective in revealing a host of repressive and exploitative social structures, and she recognizes that she, too, has taken part in the project of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Her impatience, then, with the paranoid style has more to do with its hegemony in left critical thought and the stultifying effects of its dominance. She wants to open the door for more reparative readings that are not immediately viewed as ineffective or naive. In his essay “Unlike Eve Sedgwick,” Jonathan Flatley examines Sedgwick’s conflicted tone in relation to her other work, particularly in relation to her “Queer and Now” (Flatley 2010; Sedgwick 1993).

aspects of subversion, the creation of affects of joy and delight in the celebration of our friends' relationship, and so on.

Sedgwick's criticism of paranoid reading is motivated by the desire to render such affects politically and theoretically important—that is, to make possible reparative readings that might counter the growing hegemony of strong, paranoid readings. From Sedgwick's position, the naivety associated with a non-paranoid reading has led to a place where reparative readings are considered insufficient for the task of critical and political theory.⁹⁰ In response, Sedgwick takes up Melanie Klein's concept of "positions," which are meant to break up the reading of psychoanalytic conditions as more or less permanent states of being. For Sedgwick, Klein's positions provide a way to "describe changing and heterogeneous relational stances" (2003: 128). As such, a theorist might at times inhabit a kind of paranoid or reparative position, but not be required to stay there in an attempt to provide a total critique. Likewise, various subjects, actors, and actants can be seen as inhabiting various positions within a given situation or social whole, as in the marriage scene with our friends. Repair in this sense is unlike the dynamic of alienation and recovery that I have moved away from in this dissertation—repair here is not the recuperation or recreation of a prior state of wholeness. Reparative readings, then, aim at opening up and recognizing moments of life that resist or elude the repressive and stultifying aspects of norms and power. To carry out such a project requires the pursuit of "weak" theories as alternatives to the

⁹⁰ We can see this dynamic in a number of different quarters where affect theory or new materialisms are criticized for supposedly giving up the issues of power, judgment, and responsibility. See Ruth Leys (2011) and Sharon Krause (2011).

tendency to produce more totalizing theoretical work. The marriage story presents such an opportunity in its combination of coercive state power, joy amongst friends, and attempts at subversion, none of which fully captures the scene.

Strong readings, though, threaten to close such pursuits done in large part because they remain so tantalizing in their ability to provide a different way out. As an example, Sedgwick turns to Foucault and the peculiar quality of his work that has helped promote a paranoid application of his work to the problematics of subjectivity (and, as I suggest, to the state as well). First, as Sedgwick shows, Foucault's attempt in *The History of Sexuality* to "think around" the repressive hypothesis, which he first identifies and then criticizes, ultimately ends up propagating it (2003:10). As she argues, because Foucault insists on the relationship between the exercise of power in the name of the suppression and propagation of expressions of sexuality, his work in *Volume 1* has too often been taken up as "the heroic, 'liberatory,' inescapably dualistic righteousness of hunting down and attacking prohibition/repression in all its chameleonic guises" (2003: 10). When taken up in this way, Sedgwick suggests, *Volume 1* can produce a taxonomy of misunderstandings that all begin with the paranoid form of "Even beyond the repressive hypothesis, some version of prohibition is still the most important thing to understand." (2003: 11). For Sedgwick, then, whatever follows from this opening clause will always tilt toward the production of false dichotomy of repression and liberation and turn Foucault's project into one that hypostasizes the "hegemonic and subversive" (2003: 12). In a similar way, Foucault's

later lectures on governmentality and biopolitics have provided tools for making them into the form of quasi-transcendent sovereign power (cf. Agamben 1993) or the seeming infinitely applicable tool for explaining the practices of the neoliberal state (cf. Brown 2003).⁹¹ From such a perspective the possibility of achieving positive gains through state politics is foreclosed because the state has already won the day, and any engagement with the state only serves to strengthen its hold. Rancière describes this phenomenon as left-wing melancholy and right-wing frenzy: “Left-wing melancholy invites us to recognize that there is no alternative to the power of the beast and to admit that we are satisfied with by it. Right-wing frenzy warns us that the more we try to break the power of the beast, the more we contribute to its triumph” (Rancière 2009: 40).

Rancière’s diagnosis emerges from his own criticism of critical theory as a method that depends upon the logic of inversion. As Sam Chambers has argued, in Rancière’s early Althusserian period, he saw inversion as a product of the problematic of alienation in a similar in way similar to my approach in this dissertation—as a problem of abstraction lodged in a dynamic of alienation and recovery. Rancière writes, “Inversion is produced through alienation: the generic life of man becomes the means of his individual life” (Rancière 1989: 85 quoted in Chambers 2013: 132). In

⁹¹ On my reading of Foucault, this reading of biopolitics and governmentality as means to explain nearly all repressive aspects of contemporary state capitalism is not an inherent part of Foucault’s text. In other words, this reading of biopolitics and governmentality emerges from his work in much the same way that certain (bad) readings of *The History of Sexuality* gave rise to the “paranoid” impulses that Sedgwick describes. Foucault’s work on identifying and analyzing the development of various forms of power opens up the temptation apply his themes in these universalizing ways. However, Foucault himself, as I argue here, resists this impulse even as he identifies and develops these concepts in order to analyze forms of power in neoliberal capitalism.

contrast to Sedgwick, Rancière focuses less on the methodological problems of this approach than on their political ramifications. For Rancière the problem with a critical theory that relies on inversion, unmasking, and an ontology of surface and depth is that it creates a stratified model of “the philosopher and his poor” in which the philosopher is imagined to possess the hidden knowledge which the poor (or the workers or the oppressed) need to be given in order that they might free themselves from these conditions. As such, critical theory presumes that “the poor” must have a blind, unenlightened relationship to the conditions of their existence.⁹²

Drawing on Rancière’s argument, Sam Chambers points to a two-fold response that emerges from Rancière’s analysis problem of inversion. First, Rancière’s argument suggests that we reject the presumption of depth insofar as the topos of surface and depth produces a critical project that is meant to uncover what is hidden in these depths. Second, following the rejection of depth, we can presume instead that the oppressed do indeed know what is happening within these systems of oppression. As he writes, “Thus, it would be assumed that the incapable are capable; that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place” (2009: 48).⁹³ As

⁹² As Chambers shows, in a different context Rancière explains this dynamic in terms of a model of archipolitics and metapolitics: “Rancière purports to distinguish between archipolitics and metapolitics in terms of health: the former offers the medicine that will make the community truly whole, whereas the latter ‘presents itself as symptomology’ that always and unceasingly uncovers only untruth, only disease. Put simply, ‘Metapolitics is the discourse on the falseness of politics.’” (see Rancière 1999: 82 and Chambers 2013: 137)

⁹³ As Chambers points out, in an earlier version of his essay, Rancière calls this assumption a “foolish” one insofar as it rejects the taken-for-granted perspective that emancipation is about the recovery of a lost essence. I like that formulation because it points out a necessity for the theorist to be willing to play the fool in the face of the “everyone knows” and proposed naïveté of those who do not practice paranoia and inversion. Cf. Bennett, Adorno, Deleuze, and Beckett in chapter 3.

Chambers constructs this position, along with the assumption, Rancière suggests an alternative version of the concept of emancipation, one in which emancipation is no longer associated with “liberation with a lost unity” and instead associates emancipation with “the construction of new capacities” (2009: 43). As such, Chambers suggests, “A new critical dispositif could therefore reject the dream of guaranteed revolution without thereby abdicating democratic politics” (2013: 156). Sedgwick’s reparative readings and Chambers’s and Rancière’s emancipation need not entail the recovery of a lost essence or the exposure and expelling of the enemy (whether individual or structural) lurking beneath the surface, but the taking up of a new framework for taking on these enemies, of dealing with the experiences of alienation.

The State and Subjection

In the rest of this chapter I take up an alternative to the strong, paranoid approach to the dilemmas of state politics through the work of Foucault and Deleuze and Guatarri. Even though their work has been used as fodder for the development of these kinds of strong critiques of the state and of incremental state politics, I argue that these writers themselves resist the kinds of strong readings that their work can inspire.⁹⁴ Instead, through the development of a “strategic” logic, they offer the possibility of an analysis of the state that is local, non-paranoid, and perhaps even “weak” in

⁹⁴ Some readers might object that the early Foucault, at least, himself took a strong theory approach to the state.

Sedgwick's sense of the term. Instead, Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari present a view of the state and its relationship to capitalism and to subject formation that is neither necessary nor inevitable, a view that offers an alternative to the dilemma of reform or revolution.

I take my point of departure from Deleuze's essays on Foucault, "What is a Dispositif?". I begin here because in this essay Deleuze takes up the important issue of subjectivation in Foucault's work, an issue that remains of central importance throughout Foucault's work from beginning to end, and one that has been productive of some of the strongest and most paranoid theories derived from Foucault's work.⁹⁵ In his essay, Deleuze makes the perhaps counterintuitive claim that Foucault develops his notion of subjectivation in order to *avoid*, rather than produce, a totalizing image of power within the various apparatuses that he investigates. That is, the production of subjects marks a site of the potential overcoming of apparatuses of power, rather than only a site of its most rigid and totalizing power. The radical nature of this claim about Foucault's method is not that it finds emancipatory potential, but that it counters so much thinking (and indeed anxiety) about the repressive nature of the processes of subjectivation/subjectivation. Indeed, much of this recent anxiety stems from readings

⁹⁵ The use of the term "subjectivation" is important here because it relates to a significant shift in Foucault's vocabulary of the subject from his earlier and to his later work. As Sam Chambers has shown, because of inaccurate and inconsistent translation of the term *assujettissement* (often translated as subjection or subjectivation, but best translated as subjectification) this shift in Foucault's work has been under appreciated. Foucault himself made the switch from *assujettissement* to *subjectivation* because the former was too closely associated with the aspect of subjection, and not the enabling aspect of becoming and being a subject. The move to subjectivation was meant to emphasize the double aspect of the experience of being a subject and even to highlight the latter dimension of subjectivity that can account for the ability of the subject to work upon itself. For more discussion of this point see Chambers (2013: 99-103) and Milchman and Rosenberg (2007).

of Foucault's work on neoliberalism and the rise of biopolitics, as well as readings of Deleuze & Guattari that focus on the state as an "apparatus of capture." In such readings, the state and capitalism seem already to have won the day, having turned us into biopolitical agents who are only capable of understanding ourselves and each other in terms of our potential economic productivity.

In "What is a Dispositif?" Deleuze argues that Foucault does not mean for an apparatus to be fully determining of what can show up for us—it does not completely structure the conditions and possibilities of our existence—even as the dynamic, interacting forces within an apparatus do constitute these conditions. Thus, though he outlines the familiar argument that for Foucault an apparatus at its most basic is an ensemble of interacting lines of force of knowledge, power, and subjectivity that produce effects on what is seeable and sayable (2007 [2001]: 159-160), Deleuze suggests that Foucault holds apart these lines of force within an apparatus in order to avoid viewing them as an immutable force. Therefore, on Deleuze's reading of Foucault, rather than the pre-determined outcome of these convergent lines of force, the subject provides the break in them. For Deleuze, Foucault turned to this reading of the subject as a response to "a crisis" that threatened to make his work on the social apparatus into a strong structuralism in which "unbreakable lines of force would impose definitive contours" (2007 [2001]: 161). Hence, for Deleuze, Foucault's "Self" which is produced in a social apparatus is "neither knowledge nor power" but a "surplus-value" to the lines of knowledge and power that produce it (2007 [2001]:

161). The lines of subjectivation make possible our seeing the possibilities of the break or transformation of a social apparatus giving way to another, “which itself may not yet exist” (2007 [2001]: 162). As an illustration, Deleuze considers an emergent subject like the liberated slave. Under the apparatus of slavery, the individual (as slave) is determined in her position in the apparatus of slavery, but that very apparatus simultaneously produces the possibility of its undoing (the liberated slave) even as it does not prepare in advance the social conditions of this new possibility. The freed slave, then, must come to find herself in a social world devoid of pre-existing social roles for her. As such, this is not a story either of an essential subjectivation nor of a recovery of a common humanity. Instead, here the emancipated must come to take part in shaping “new forms of power knowledge” (2007 [2001]: 161).

On Deleuze’s account, this loosening up of the sense of necessity in these lines of force, also allows Foucault to develop a non-linear account of history that pursues the multiple ways that time and history fold into one another. The task of the theorist then involves identifying not only past and present processes that are productive of our current experience (including those that we may believe need critical unmasking), but also the possibilities for newness that the past and present make possible. For Foucault, according to Deleuze, “each apparatus is defined in terms of its newness content and its creativity content, this marking at the same time its ability to transform itself, or indeed, to break down in favour of a future apparatus, unless it concentrates its strength along its harder, more rigid, more solid lines” (2007 [2001]: 163-164). Here

subjectivation seems to be capable of producing these transformative effects that will lead to creative innovations and the eventual undoing of current apparatuses. Thus, the subject appears in its current state neither as a complete manifestation of the past and present nor as a projection toward some determined future actualization. Instead, in this scheme only what is past is actual (though not inactive or inert), and the current situation is always in a process of becoming. As Deleuze describes it, "The newness of an apparatus in relation to those which have gone before is what we call its actuality, our actuality. The new is the current. The current is not what we are but rather what we are in the process of becoming - that is, the Other, our becoming-other" (2007 [2001]: 164). Thus, Deleuze sees Foucault working on several fronts: Foucault engages both an analytic project of investigating how the actuality of the past acts on the present and a diagnostic project of examining these current conditions present a capacity for creativity (2007 [2001]: 165).

Rather than a strong theory of the subject and a paranoid reading of state and social power, Deleuze finds in Foucault a project aimed at identifying the forces that work against such a strong reading. He comments, "If a diagnostic was found in Foucault, it was in the need to locate, for each apparatus, lines of breakage and fissure. Sometimes these were situated on the level of powers; at other times on the level of knowledges. More generally, it should be said that the lines of subjectivation indicate fissures and fractures" (2007 [2001]: 167). Read this way, Foucault's identification of the rise of biopolitics and a governmentality of security is not intended to add another

tool to the critical toolbox that can then be wielded to unmask the countless instances of biopoliticization. We must not become limited by this aspect of his analysis. Instead, we might use his work to develop positive alternatives to the neo-liberal regime that go beyond paranoid criticism alone. But to draw such a position from Foucault requires a shift of focus from the conclusions of his study (important as they may be) to his vision of the development and enactment of social formations themselves.

Strategy

To do this work, both Foucault and Deleuze & Guattari develop what might be called a “strategic,” or anticipatory, logic of causation that analyzes the present in terms of a continuum between past and future in which neither past, present, nor future are fixed in relation to one another.⁹⁶ This strategic approach resists a strong reading of the relationship between past, present, and future. For Foucault, the past bears on the present and the present on the future, but the relationships between these temporal moments is not fixed; any of three may impinge upon the other in new and unexpected ways. For Foucault, this strategic logic allows him to analyze heterogeneous elements within social and historical moments as distinct entities, even as they act together to create powerful effects. In this way, Foucault resists collapsing various heterogeneous powers of an apparatus (governmental, economic, social) into a unified bloc, even as he seeks to analyze the power and effects of their interaction.

⁹⁶ For a discussion of this dynamic within in the context of becoming see Connolly (2011 and 2012).

Foucault's logic of strategy, then, functions as a kind of weak theory in that it resists the push to a totalizing theory. Further, it seeks to identify and analyze heterogeneous elements in a way that multiplies the appearance of effects without resolving them into a strong theory. As he puts it, "a logic of strategy does not stress contradictory terms within a homogeneity [as does dialectical logic] that promises their resolution in a unity. The function of a strategic logic is to establish the possible connections between disparate terms which remain disparate" (2008 [1978]: 42). This logic, therefore, allows Foucault to hold together seemingly disparate elements in economy and state government to see how they influence each other without becoming one. Moreover, such a logic frees up future possibilities without collapsing them into a situation with an inevitable outcome—such as a totalizing process of subjectivation or the necessary growth of state power. Thus, Foucault's analysis of the development of neo-liberalism will avoid essentializing any particular configuration of the many interacting elements that constitute it, allowing new possibilities to be imagined from it.

Hence, in his analysis of neoliberalism, Foucault resists a model of neoliberalism as simply a reactivation of liberal policies in the current political situation. As he writes:

The problem is to let knowledge of the past work on the experience of the present. It is not at all a matter of coating the present in a form of a simple repetition that is undoubtedly what is to be avoided at any cost, and that is why I stress this problem of neoliberalism in order to try to detach it from these critiques made on the basis of the pure and simple transpositions of historical moulds. (2008 [1978]: 130-131)

Similarly, Foucault rejects a critical theory of the state that views various forms of the state as inherently related and therefore to be praised or feared for the same reasons. He thus criticizes what he calls an “inflationary” critique of the state that would posit a universal notion of the state, particularly as an all-consuming power, which is a crucial danger to avoid for a critical project that seeks to criticize certain state practices without falling into a universalist critique of state power. Falling into such a trap risks putting critical theory on the same footing as the neoliberal critique of the state (not to be confused with the critique of the neoliberal state) in which the state is viewed as overweening in its involvement in social and economic life, even as neoliberalism works to reinforce the power of the state through biopolitics. Strong theories of the state that rely on inversion and unmasking often fall into such a trap. For Foucault such an analysis of the state (from either side) both collapses various incarnations/imaginings of something called “state” that do not necessarily share a common essence and occludes the particularity of these apparatuses (and, we might say, the particularity of the possibilities for breaks or fissures within them).

Foucault first identifies the “inflationary mechanism” of “state phobia” in the German ordoliberal response to the problems of fascism in the 20th century (2008 [1978]: 185ff.). Such an approach makes a series of mistakes in relation to an understanding of the state. First, it attributes to the state “an intrinsic tendency to expand” its scope and power such that it will inevitably take over the realm of “civil society” (2008 [1978]: 187). Yet, such a reading of the state repeats the same problem

that Marx identified with the state and civil society in *The King of Prussia*. That is, this reading posits an abstract line between the state and civil society, taking them to be clearly separate entities. As such, a theory of state and civil society can give way to a strong reading that overlooks the constructed quality of these various elements as well as the multiple ways that they interact. Thus, second, Foucault locates within this state phobia a tendency to generalize a certain “genetic continuity or evolutionary implication between different forms of the state” (2008 [1978]: 187). That is, unspecified criticism of the state in the name of the autonomy of civil society can lead to a blind attribution of hostility toward civil society to a wide range of very different incarnations of governmental practices (or governmentality).

The implication of such a critique, as with a dialectical logic that abstracts from the concrete, is that “there is inflation in the sense of an increasing interchangeability of analyses and a loss of specificity” (2008 [1978]: 188). Again, this position makes the development of a strong, even paranoid, reading of the state much more likely. Take, for example, Agamben’s theory of *homo sacer* that when combined with his appropriation of Foucault’s concept of biopower makes it possible to locate within any version of the state the inevitable road to a certain kind of fascism and the camp. Such a loss of specificity distorts the reality of the particular workings of the state as well as limits the possibility of finding alternate ways in which the state might act. Foucault’s warning against state phobia here seriously challenges the viability of such a (paranoid) approach to the dynamics of state power, for this kind of analysis only

works once the theorist has abstracted from the concrete *dispositif*. Thus, Foucault claims that this state phobia “enables one to avoid paying the price of reality and actuality inasmuch as, in the name of this dynamism of the state, something like a kinship or danger, something like the great fantasy of the paranoiac devouring state can always be found” (2008 [1978]: 188). Foucault, then, directs our attention back to the concrete conditions in which the state functions and exerts various forms of power (and in which there are always powers of resistance as well). The point, then, is that these abstractions, as with the problem of alienation, create a politics that remains caught in the reactive mode in which the only possibilities appear to be revolution or capitulation.

Transactional Realities

It is important to note here that Foucault resists taking civil society as an empirical given that necessarily stands against or outside of the state. Foucault instead prefers to speak of categories like the state, civil society, freedom as “transactional realities” that are real only insofar as they produce effects in a system of relations (an apparatus) (2008 [1978]: 297).⁹⁷ The concept of civil society, like those of ordo- and neo-liberalism, is a product of a particular historical conjunction and appears in relation to the development of a particular state apparatus. Transactional realities possess two key characteristics: first, they have not always existed (thus, they have

⁹⁷ cf. John Dewey and Arthur Bentley who originally developed the concept of transactionalism in the context of epistemology and psychology (1960).

been created through a process of a system of relationships); second, they are real and produce powerful effects (2008 [1978]: 297). With such a view of the elements of various modes of governmentality and social life Foucault avoids logics of critique that posit a desired good (such as a certain vision of freedom or democracy) as an abstract or ideal reference point against which various governmental policies are judged or which we must recover. Instead, transactional realities of this type “are born precisely from the interplay of relations of power and everything that constantly eludes them, at the interface, so to speak, of governors and governed” (2008 [1978]: 297).

Thus, framing the effects of state capitalism within a strategic logic that analyzes transactional realities reveals (at least) two possibilities for this discussion. First, that these realities are born from relations of power indicates that they must be seen as specific to a particular set of relations. And even when those relations are in a particular formation for a period of time, they are still dynamic and fluctuating, rather than static. Further, at certain points, as the dynamics of particular power relations shift so does the reality which they produce. For example, as William Connolly has shown, when the evangelical Christian right entered into political-social policy relations with neoliberal economic policies, new possibilities became available to the Bush administration in terms of logics of war, terrorism, economy, education, civil rights, and so on (Connolly 2008). This confluence (or transaction of power relations) indeed shifted the very “nature” of war, terrorism, interrogation and the subjects who enact and resist these terms and practices. Likewise, as a growing number of evangelical

Christians have come to embrace some forms of environmentalism as part of God's command to act as stewards of the earth and as some evangelicals have moved away from the demonization of homosexuality, new possibilities are opened for what constitutes our understanding and policy making toward the environment, social and familial relations, etc. Indeed, we could say that evangelicalism itself is becoming something other than it was before. The same might (hopefully) be said of the relationship between marriage and the state as same-sex marriage become more widespread. The conservative fear that same-sex marriage will change the "traditional" institution of marriage just may prove to be right.

Second, and perhaps most importantly for this discussion, Foucault notes that it is not only the "interplay of relations of power" that create these transactional realities, but also "*everything that constantly eludes them*" (2008 [1978]: 297 emphasis added). Here Foucault is trying to show both that something *always* escapes the relations of power of dominant governmental or societal apparatuses, which in itself may not be a particularly powerful insight, and that these things that escape the apparatus are themselves *a constituent element of the apparatus itself*. Thus, an apparatus and its effects are constituted both by what the relations of power capture and define as well as by that which escapes them. This insight is crucial for warding off both the tendency to develop strong theories and the problematic of alienation and recovery, for it rejects any essential benchmarks (for freedom or democracy, for instance) even as it seeks to lay bare the constituent elements of a given apparatus and its effects. The point

becomes clearer when we turn to Foucault's example of liberalism and its relation to freedom. For Foucault, liberalism is one mode of governmentality that powerfully produces freedom. But importantly, Foucault resists analyzing freedom as a universal that is actualized in better or worse ways at particular moments in history. Instead, "[f]reedom is never anything other—but this is already a great deal—than an actual relation between governors and governed" (2008 [1978]: 63). Thus, to understand freedom in relation to liberalism for Foucault, we must understand what freedom is and how it functions in relation to liberalism's mode of governing and the subjects that it governs. In this regard, he claims that liberalism is both a powerful producer and consumer of freedom—that is, it must produce the conditions of freedom which it then make available for "consumption" through various techniques of organization and management (2008 [1978]: 63). Certain modes of freedom (of the market, property, certain civil rights, etc.) then are seen as "required" in order for liberalism to function according to its own logic. And because such freedoms are not universals waiting to be actualized we must see both *that* they are and *how* they are produced. Further, that these freedoms must be organized and managed precisely through security indicates the paradox at the heart of the liberal model of freedom (2008 [1978]: 63-65).

Indeed, for Foucault, definitive of liberalism is the "economy of power" constituted by "this interplay of freedom and security" (2008 [1978]: 65). Further, that liberal and neo-liberal regimes have been so concerned with issues of security indicate a tacit awareness of "that which eludes" them. For the fact that something always

escapes it produces the very need for security in the first place. This point might somehow feel self-evident: of course security concerns exist in relation to the fact that something always escapes and potentially threatens us. Yet Foucault shows not only that our modes of governmentality are constituted in part by things beyond our control but also that they *create* that which eludes them—even as it eludes them. For example, since 9/11 a powerful part of the United States' self-awareness has been constituted by the creation of a set of subjects (phantasmatic though they may be) who "hate freedom" and "oppose our way of life." And even as we can identify these others, it is crucial that they remain forever beyond us, elusive, uncapturable. For only in this way can our experience of freedom be sustained in this mode in opposition to those who would change or destroy it. This point may even appear as counterintuitive for the marriage case, because same-sex marriage could be read as part of the state's attempt to capture what is increasingly becoming acceptable in the realm of civil society. But here it is important to remember Rancière's argument that such a reading depends upon the assumption of a naive class that blindly accepts the state's control. In Foucault's terms, this reading of the state's capture of marriage demonstrates the kind of state phobia he resists. Further, it allows us to read the phenomenon of marriage as a continuous, given reality, rather than a transactional one.

Foucault also demonstrates a similar dynamic in his *Security, Territory, Population* lectures given in 1977-78, one year prior to *The Birth of Biopolitics*. There he frames the logic of the co-constitutive dynamic of an apparatus and that which

escapes it in terms of “counter-conducts.” He writes, for instance, “The history of *raison d'Etat*, the history of governmental *ratio*, and the history of counter-conducts opposed to it, are inseparable from each other” (2007 [1978]: 357). Moreover, these counter-conducts serve as “the stake” of the state - that they motivate state policy and action (2007 [1978]: 357). Thus, Foucault suggests that one of the conditions of possibility for the (re)production of the state of governmentality is the existence of its particular rivals that seek its undoing. Likewise, as our mode of governmentality shifts so does our response to it. Thus, we might see that a certain version of liberal democracy in some way depended on various versions of left critiques of it. The two are even co-constitutive as both they, and the possibility for their grounds of contestation, emerge together. For Foucault there is no pure outside of apparatuses of power (in this case the state apparatus) and the possible forms of contestation are always-already inflected by the apparatus in advance. Of course, we must guard against the danger of viewing the state as possessing an endogenous power “growing like a huge monster or automatic machine” (2007 [1978]: 354). The co-constitutive nature of the state and its counter-conducts instead highlights the contingency of both - they can come into being, evolve, and pass away.

Yet, in these earlier lectures Foucault explores more deeply the power of the state to shape us and our view of the world. Here he describes the state variously as the “principle of intelligibility,” the “strategic schema,” or the “regulatory idea of governmental reason” (2007 [1978]: 286). As the principle of intelligibility the state far

exceeds the basic notion of government as a practice of the state. Here we see the depth of Foucault's notion of governmental rationality (or governmentality)—not just as mechanism for governing through security or discipline but as a powerful orderer of rationality itself. For example, he suggests that the shift in the understanding of the state marks a change in government, and, more powerfully, "*the transformation of Western reason*" that culminated in a new way of "thinking, reasoning, and calculating" (2007 [1978]: 286, emphasis added). The result has been a rethinking of the state and of history and temporality, in which universality is abandoned for a view of history that rests on a concept of "an open time and a multiple spatiality" (2007 [1978]: 290). Therefore, the opening up of history required *and made possible* by the shift to governmentality makes visible the contingency of this very apparatus of power and, thus, gives rise to a plurality of counter-realities, even as they share the same conditions of possibility for their existence.

Anticipation and Massification

I turn briefly now to Deleuze and Guattari's account of the state in *A Thousand Plateaus*, because there they pursue more extensively than Foucault the conditions under which the state becomes more consolidated, even as they work, like Foucault, against an endogenous account of the growth of state power. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari take up the distinction between state and non-state entities, and in order to avoid an evolutionary account of the rise of the State they contest the idea

that non-state entities are pre-State in origin. Instead they claim that non-states are “counter-State societies organizing mechanisms that ward off the State-form, which make its [the State’s] crystallization possible” (1980 [2005]: 429). This claim, like Foucault’s critique of an inflationary reading of the state, works against a model of the development of the state and capitalism as the inevitable evolution of society from the primitive to the more complex. Moreover, this analysis of the state and counter-State movements allows them to argue against a Marxian argument that would presume that the overcoming of capitalism requires the overthrow of the State. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari find in non-state societies a series of practices and tendencies, which simultaneously work to move society in the direction of the state form and to ward off the state form from taking hold on their society (1980 [2005]: 430-431). Further, they suggest that that which the State or non-state seeks to avoid may not yet exist in any definite form; that is, the mechanisms of a social formation are always at work to ward off these anticipated deviations. As they write, “To ward off is also to anticipate” (1980 [2005]: 431).

However, for Deleuze and Guattari, as for Foucault, the State can indeed enact a powerful set of effects that rigidify certain forms of social and economic order. Indeed, they argue that the State functions by mechanisms of overcoding, which may also be described as processes of stratification. States operate by drawing lines of various types (geographical, legal, etc.) that segment society into various functions while simultaneously causing these segments to resonate with each other across

various strata of society. States (and other social organizations) operate more or less rigidly depending on the degree of resonance they generate between its various sections (cf. Althusser's "teeth-gnashing harmony"). Powerful, centralized states, for instance, have the power to generate resonance powerfully across diverse segments of the society. For example, they argue that in a rigid society, "The face of the father, teacher, colonel, boss, enter into redundancy, refer back to a center of significance that moves across the various circles and passes back over all of the segments" (1980 [2005]: 211). Further, they suggest that capitalism works paradoxically in relation to the State for whereas the state tends toward the practices of stratification, capitalism tends also must work to against such stratification in order to increase possibilities for growth, conglomeration, and the increase of capital. Insofar as capitalism works against the stratification of the State it (somewhat paradoxically given the current conditions of state-capitalism) also works as a kind of counter-State movement. As they write, "Everything changes depending on whether these flows connect up with a war machine or, on the contrary, enter into conjunctions or a general conjugation that appropriates them for the State" (1980 [2005]: 459). In the USA, for instance, neoliberal capitalism has entered into powerful conjunctions with the State that creates a complex set of drives in which the State and capitalism often have competing ends even as they push one another to particular actions and policies.

Despite the power of this State capitalism resonance-machine, which seems to capture all that might escape it, Deleuze and Guattari, like Foucault, maintain that

“something always gets away” (1980 [2005]: 471-472). To make this point they draw a distinction between macro and micropolitics and molar and molecular levels of analysis. An analysis of the macro or molar level of an apparatus will focus on the the large scale forces that compose an apparatus, perhaps focusing on “state” or “capitalism” as unified entities. The micro or molecular, on the other hand, identifies the multiplicity of drives and practices that actually produce phenomena that then show up on the macro level. On the level of micropolitics “a society is defined by its lines of flight” (1980 [2005]: 216). Lines of flight, as practices that work against the stratifying effects of the state, share some relation to Foucault’s notion of the various elements—practices, subjects, entities—that elude the capture of an apparatus by resisting or fleeing it. Like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari see these lines of flight as co-constitutive of an apparatus, at least at the micro level. Yet, paradoxically Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the more rigid a society becomes, the more possibilities it creates for escape (lines of flight). For in order to become rigid an apparatus also has to become segmentary—it must multiply the number of functions it controls - and each segment opens the possibility for something to escape. Take the example above of the various roles (of the father, teacher, colonel, boss) that resonate together in a rigid society. Each of these roles is linked up to macro dimensions of society that relate to the roles of the household, workplace, citizen, and so on, and to the micro dimensions of these relationships where drives and practices that reinforce or resist these roles play out. Thus, each role or segment provides a site for deviance from the prescriptions of a

given norm. For Deleuze and Guattari, state capitalism ends up maximizing both the possibilities for rigid control and the possibilities for lines of flight as it multiplies the number of roles taken on by each individual.

Despite the possibilities of escape intrinsic to the very structures of state capitalism—structures that would purport to foreclose such possibilities—it is important to mark the oppressive characteristics of state capitalist regimes as well. Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari take seriously the very real coercive and potentially violent consequences of these regimes both for individual and collective life and for the possibility of overcoming these consequences. These negative effects are in part a result of the very possibility of escape that they create. We can think of this mechanism of anticipation, or warding off, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense: state capitalist regimes work not only to maximize the increase of capital but also to ward off in advance unknown factors that might disrupt their smooth functioning. Both Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari identify this work as a massification, a process of subjectivation in which individuals are produced as individuals, but in such a way that they can be dealt with en masse as members of identifiable *groups* that are countable and able to be regularized. Thus, individuals become interchangeable and only "count" insofar as they are able to be fitted within determined groups.

Massification, then, opens the possibility not only for the erasure of the individual (in their interchangeability) but also for the atrocities of fascism. For Foucault this massifying power of the state makes possible the rise of biopolitics by

considering humans as part of a species that can be segmented into individuals within a population. He argues that the focus of biopolitics and population is on “a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted. Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as political problem” (1975 [2003]: 243). Biopolitics works like Deleuze and Guattari’s segmentation in which society multiplies roles so individuals can be better managed by the state for the productive aims of capitalism. Thus, individuals can be normalized through discipline and regulation along a number of lines - sexuality, health practices, procreation— in terms of their productivity for society (1975 [2003]: 252-253). Thus, we get the introduction of the “enterprise society” in which individuals are encouraged to be and measured in terms of their success in being entrepreneurs for their lives and prosperity (2008 [1978]: 147). Foucault notes how racism enters here as a means to make life “healthier” and purer (1975 [2003]: 255), and we could easily add various other categories that have been deployed to these ends—many of which he has mapped out for us, including madness, sexuality, disability.⁹⁸ Likewise, Deleuze and Guattari identify the massification of individuals as a reaction of power centers (be they the State, capitalism, or something else) to their inability to control the flows that are always moving to escape. Yet, they caution against seeing the lines of flight as inevitable or unstoppable escape routes from repressive forms of subjectivation. They write:

⁹⁸ This is the kind of “drop dead gorgeous” theory, as Sedgwick calls it, that Foucault can produce. But, as seductive as it is, we must resist making it into a strong theory.

"It would be oversimplifying to believe that the only risk they fear and confront is allowing themselves to be recaptured in the end, letting themselves be sealed in, tied up, reknotted, reterritorialized...instead of connecting with other lines and each time augmenting its valence, *turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple, the passion of abolition.*" (1980 [2005]: 229)

In other words, the desire for abolition can lead down a destructive path that could undermine the attempt to escape the current regime. Indeed, at the end of this destructive path lies fascism for the lines of flight just as it does for the regimes of power that produce them.

No Exit

Thus, both Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari appear rather ambivalent about the possibilities of real escape, for such a possibility would produce another kind of strong theory that their project work against. Indeed, to speak of escape or emancipation seems too strong on the account given here. Other than his warnings against endogenous readings of state power Foucault, as Deleuze notes, gives little indication in much of his work of what might be done to ameliorate the repressive conditions of subjectivation under State capital forms of governmentality,. For as we have noted, he resists accounts of the state and society that judge them in terms of better or worse or more or less freedom per se. Every apparatus produces effects that both restrict and produce the conditions of existence. On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari seem to be slightly more hopeful about the possibilities for lines of flight out of the regimes of State capitalism, at least from one perspective. They seem to place

some hope in the increasing minoritization of the world under the global capitalist axiomatic. For as this axiomatic works on the one hand to massify and make us manipulable as countable sets, it also produces the proliferation of minorities which remain non-denumerable. As they write, "At the same time as capitalism is effectuated in the denumerable sets serving as its models, it necessarily constitutes nondenumerable sets that cut across and disrupt those models" (1980 [2005]: 472). As nondenumerable, these minorities are also "nonaxiomizable" and constitute "multiplicities of escape and flux" (1980 [2005]: 470).

The state (and capitalist institutions), of course, also works to neutralize the power of the minority by creating axioms that will effectively deal with them (1980 [2005]: 470). In Foucault's terms, the state can hope to make them another population to be regularized. Internally, the minority must fight the tendency to seek integration as a solution to its problem of being unrecognizable to the state (1980 [2005]: 472). For Deleuze and Guattari, "The power of the minorities is not measured by their capacity to enter and make themselves felt within the majority system...but to bring to bear the force of the non-denumerable sets, however small they may be, against the denumerable sets, even if they are infinite, reversed, or changed, even they if [sic] imply new axioms or, beyond that, a new axiomatic" (1980 [2005]: 471). Ultimately, they suggest, "It is by leaving the plan(e) of capital, *and never ceasing to leave it*, that a mass becomes increasingly revolutionary and destroys the dominant equilibrium of the denumerable sets" (1980 [2005]: 472, emphasis added). But on Deleuze and

Guattari's own terms this never-ceasing escape is not really a possibility because, as they argue, all of these forces of capture or flight (or at least the anticipation of them) exist simultaneously within all of the various apparatuses that make them possible. It seems that on their own account, the minorities can no more continually leave the plane of capital any more than capital can halt the escape of minorities working against the consolidations of capital.

That said, to be ambivalent about the emancipatory possibilities of political and social life is not to give oneself over to totalizing view of state capitalism. Instead, as I proposed at the beginning of this chapter, we might begin to look for the possibilities for contestation or resistance within the conditions of the state itself. To return to the case of marriage, many will continue to argue that such rights-claiming only capitulates to the power of the state to identify and regulate relations between various constituencies. Such an argument can surely draw some support from the work of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari as laid out here. But we can also go another way. For the conditions that make possible the claiming of rights also has opened up the potential for rights claims that can potentially disrupt those very conditions.⁹⁹ Again, in the case of gay marriage one can argue that the granting of marriage rights to same-sex couples will only capture them within the neoliberal governmentality of biopolitics. In such a view, marriage seems to recognize the gay population as potential contributors to the economic machine of capitalism. We see this kind of argument within LGBT groups that try to show that same-sex partners are just as (or even more) "productive"

⁹⁹ cf. Karen Zivi (2011).

as their opposite-sex counterparts or that same-sex parents raise children who are at least as socially well-adapted (and, thus, economically productive) as straight parents. But if we employ the strategic logic I have been developing in this chapter, we might hold these various elements of the rights debate separate—in order to see how they have come into being, how they impinge upon each other, and what effects they might make possible. For instance, what if we were to admit that same-sex marriage would, indeed, change “traditional” marriage? We might begin to see that the introduction of new forms of kinship can release powerful potentials in various directions: to undermine patriarchy, to begin to delink the production of healthy productive children to standards of social worth, and perhaps shift ideal understandings of economic and social practices in general.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, we may come to see that the social and economic conditions of neoliberalism have made possible this very innovation. For the production of the possibility of rights-claiming, freedom, and even individual entrepreneurship has certainly contributed in no small degree to the production of a queer movement seeking its own liberation.

¹⁰⁰ cf. Chambers (2003a).

Failure: The Best Medicine?

Samuel Beckett opens perhaps his most famous play, *Endgame*, with an enigmatic invocation of Eubulides's *sorites* paradox, or the paradox of the heap:

CLOV (fixed gaze, tonelessly): Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished (Pause). Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, the impossible heap. (Beckett, 1958: 1)¹⁰¹

Both the meaning of the paradox and its referent remain unclear. We are not given any account of what "it" is and what it might mean for "it" to be finished. There is only the possibility of an "impossible heap." Clov suggests that, perhaps when it is over, "I can't be punished any more" (1958: 1). He then shuffles off to his kitchen—a 10 cubic foot extension of the small cell in which the characters reside—and notes that it has "nice dimensions, nice proportions" (1958: 2). All we can see in the small room are Hamm—who sits in his wheeled chair and whose face at this point is covered with a handkerchief—and two trashcans, which we will later learn are the homes of Nagg and Nell, who are possibly Hamm's parents. Hamm, then, appears to awake, yawns, removes the handkerchief from his face, and declares: "Me—(yawns)—to play" (1958: 2). With that Beckett begins this play by suspending us (and his characters) between the sense of something (perhaps, impossibly) coming to an end and the commencement of a game or play. Yet, the play that the characters go on to engage in feels little like a game with any recognizable arc. Instead, *Endgame* leads us through a

¹⁰¹ That Beckett is invoking Eubulides' paradox is obscure at best and only becomes slightly clearer in Hamm's later reiteration of a form of the paradox that ends with his exclamation of "that old Greek" (1958: 70).

series of broken, repetitive dialogues that provide little narrative that might provide information or shape to create a story of the characters's lives. The "play" that unfolds will become Hamm and Clov's—with occasional interludes with Nagg and Nell—confounding, repetitive, and comic (if not clownish) dialogue.¹⁰²

Beckett's *Endgame*, as a work nearly devoid of context and action, may appear to be a strange place to pursue—much less complete—the project of difference to which this dissertation has attempted to contribute. Yet, this opening scene in some way recalls the epigraphs with which I began this dissertation: Nietzsche's depiction of the human suspended as a bridge, an on-the-way, and Foucault's challenge to take up the question and project of "What can be played?". Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to pursue some version of this sense of suspension and possibility by considering dimensions of alienation in images of the human (and humanist politics), the self and subjectivity, and the politics of the state as these experiences condition our sense of the limits and potential of contemporary life. In these discussions, I have been circling around the question of how we might theorize and navigate the experiences of living a (human) life in contemporary conditions that appear to be simultaneously fecund and fallow, beautiful and brutal, promising and punishing.¹⁰³ Certainly the feeling of being "nearly finished" deeply imbues the contemporary condition as it is

¹⁰² The lack of action and in the play, along with the isolated world of the cell, lends the play to post-apocalyptic and anti-political readings that see the play as a depiction of life in the post-Holocaust nuclear age (Adorno 1982 [1961]) or in the modern condition of the death of God or of God's abandonment of humanity (Cavell 2002).

¹⁰³ One of the most compelling and insightful discussions of this kind of dilemma in light of the American imperative for optimism can be found in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011). In a different way, Sara Ahmed has criticized the contemporary cultural imperative for women to aim primarily at a state of happiness. See her *The Promise of Happiness* (2010).

marked by frequent economic crises, a changing climate, the rise of new covert forms of warfare, and so on. But the possibility of new forms of life likewise punctuate contemporary experience. In this chapter, with Beckett, I want to dwell with the two experiences of suspension and, more brutally, failure that he thematizes so well, even as we will see, he and his characters fail to achieve it.

I take up Beckett and failure here because Beckett's work captures, in an especially poignant way, various conditions of alienation; Beckett pushes these experiences, along with his characters and his audience, to their limits, but his play stops short of promising a resolution or new foundation for taking on the dilemmas of meaning and recognition.¹⁰⁴ To do so, Beckett undoes the traditional demands put upon a drama in terms of place, time, and (narrative) action. Instead of answering these demands, he suspends his plays between somewhere and nowhere, an uncertain past and an uncertain future, between nothing happening and "something taking its course." The plays are set in liminal spaces nearly devoid of context, outside any place that might constitute a shared common world. In *Endgame* isolation appears to be the essential condition of the characters: cut off from a public, social world outside the cell, if a larger social world can even be taken to exist at all. Even in their relationships to one another, they seem essentially alienated both physically and psychically. Nagg and Nell are isolated in their cans by their immobility; Hamm is bound to his chair by his disability (or his refusal to stand and walk) and by his blindness; and even Clov,

¹⁰⁴ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit point to the identification between the actors on Beckett's stage and the viewers (1993: 28).

who seems to have the most autonomy through the mobility of his body, cannot rest because of his apparent inability to sit. Moreover, Hamm and Clov are locked in a co-dependent relationship for subsistence in which no real action seems possible. Instead, there is only endless talking, Clov's extermination of a flea and (perhaps) a rat, his occasional pushing Hamm around the room, and the endless running out of things: biscuits, pap, words, and perhaps life itself. As Robert Gilman has noted, *Endgame* is not a work of social commentary; rather, it seems almost to be situated outside of history where Beckett pursues "human ontology, in the status of the stripped isolated self beneath social elaboration" (1988: 83-85). In totally stripping away the sociopolitical context, Beckett pushes us to come to terms with the idea that the difficulties of action and agency (and of politics) cannot be remedied by the right sort of context or by a recovery of an original essence, for no context or essence will do. Instead, Beckett works to thematize the uncertain, contingent dimensions of life that depend on the ongoing creation and enactment of context and its meaning in the first place.

Yet, in so doing, his work also shows us that things are not all bad. The characters (and the audience) sometimes laugh, they at times experience some moments of narrative cohesion and even joy, even if it seems almost always over and gone. As Nell says, "And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more" (1958: 19). Beckett's "play," then, takes

place in a strange liminal zone suspended between humor and despair, failure and success. It therefore provides another approach to the problematics of alienation that I have been tracing throughout this project—alienation as an experience of both suspension and failure. With Beckett, I consider another way of understanding and experiencing this sense of alienation and the strange form of agency it supplies. Because success is too often judged from the perspective of normative modes of discourse that hold narrow views of the political and the possibilities for the experience and efficacy of a plurality of forms of action and agency, these modes of thought cause us to miss forms of agency, and forms of politics, that persist and thrive in the mode of alienation, failure, suspension, and even humor—as well as the ways these forms of life can affect and reshape these dominant modes of thought themselves.

Against readings of Beckett as overly pessimistic or as a carrier of an underlying humanist existentialism, I argue that Beckett's work presents a stark vision of the ongoing struggle to create a space for action, but a vision that moves away from dominant criteria for action, in the first place.¹⁰⁵ In pursuing this project, Beckett employs humor, parody, play (elements of life that are often not considered “serious enough” for the hard work of politics),¹⁰⁶ and, of course, despair (an experience

¹⁰⁵ As Bersani and Dutoit describe, “Beckett’s characters, unrelated to any reality, social or metaphysical, beyond the instant in which they may or may not begin again to speak, continuously reperform through their language their entry into the world” (1993: 36).

¹⁰⁶ Play is not universally denigrated as insufficient for theory (and politics). Hans-Georg Gadamer saw play as a central aspect of a hermeneutical aesthetics (see Gadamer 2004 [1975], especially Part I, Chapter 2). Gadamer’s concept of artwork as the putting of various elements *in play* resonates with Beckett’s dramatic scenes that depend as much on the arrangement of objects and characters (and,

ironically not considered unworthy as a motivation for politics), all of which project an novel image of the limits and possibilities of late modern life. In this pursuit, he provides an important way of understanding failure and alienation for political thought. Beckett shifts the time and space of action, dramatizes its fits and starts, and thereby provides an image of agency that illumines the persistence of life at the edges, at the limits of zones of the political, intelligibility, and experiences of subjectivity. In so doing, I argue, he gives us a way of seeing forms of action and agency that are traditionally excluded from politics, where agency and action were not and are not ever eliminated, but fail to meet the normative criteria of success. Agency here is only ever subjunctive, it must be taken up as a risky endeavor of failure to begin (again) where failure always risks both failing to fail (and getting recaptured by and dominant normative orders) and failing completely (that is, coming to nothing).

Refusal

CLOV: So you all want me to leave you.

HAMM: Naturally.

CLOV: Then I'll leave you.

HAMM: You can't leave us.

CLOV: Then I won't leave you.

HAMM: Why don't you finish us?

(Pause.)

I'll tell you the combination of the cupboard if you promise to finish me.

even, dialogue itself as a kind of object taken out of its typical context) as on the development of a coherent narrative. In this sense, play takes on a kind of methodological role like Gilles Deleuze's "method of dramatization" in which a concept can be analyzed not as a representation of a *logos*, but a creation of dynamic scene that gains its efficacy from its ability both to create and to illuminate new effects (2002 [1967]). Iain Mackenzie and Robert Porter have recently taken up this approach as a potential method for political theory (2011). Finally, Jacques Derrida, too, relied on a concept of play in the development of his concept of deconstruction (1978).

CLOV: I couldn't finish you.
HAMM: Then you won't finish me.
CLOV: I'll leave you, I have things to do.¹⁰⁷

In dialogues like these Beckett thematizes the difficulty of escape, of bringing things to an end, even in a world as bare as that of *Endgame*. Here Hamm and Clov take up a game of failure and refusal in which they resist listening and responding to the other in anything we might call “conventional” terms. Throughout Beckett’s work his characters continually attempt to bring an end to their predicaments and to the demands of the relationships in which they are embedded by refusing the given terms and conditions of discourse—only to find themselves bound up again by the tangled imbrications of life and language. Indeed, as Bersani and Dutoit have argued, Beckett’s whole body of work represents an attempt to fail—to refuse the demands of language and genre draw down to nothing the language, meaning, and its contexts. But one of the most prominent and precarious aspects of taking up a project that intends to fail—at least in terms of normative definitions of success—is that the refusal that these projects demand puts them in a troubling position in relation to their project of failure. Such projects of failure, as Bersani and Dutoit suggest, are “dangerous” on their own terms not because of “the common anxiety *about* failing, but rather an anxiety about *not* failing” (1993: 1). Clov and Hamm pursue their projects of refusal and failure in *Endgame* in the hopes of bringing their situation to end, but even this project continues to entangle them again. Likewise, as the author, Beckett pursues of a kind of minimalism of meaning and context as an apparent attempt to fail the conventions of

¹⁰⁷ (Beckett 1958: 37).

drama and meaning, all while recognizing that there is no chance of complete escape from the systems of power and meaning that give shape to our lives. Bersani and Dutoit again put this point simply: “Perhaps the most serious reproach we can make against Samuel Beckett is that he has failed to fail” (1993: 11).

The pursuit of failure is not unique to Beckett. Similar projects have been taken up by a range of movements and authors that aim to refuse normative terms of political and economic life, of sex and family, and even of academic disciplines. There is a growing line of thinkers from William James to Gilles Deleuze to Judith Halberstam and movements from separatist groups to Occupy Wall Street that have embraced some sort of failure as means to contest hegemonic criteria of success that privilege or demand certain bodies, subject positions, and forms of agency as capable of (or counting as) participating in political life.¹⁰⁸ They have made similar calls for taking up the project of failure not in order to develop a more capacious attitude toward human finitude and the demands of capitalist modernity, but as a project of throwing off these very demands and standards of success. These theorists contest the criteria for agency set by dominant normative demands for sovereign, responsible, moral action, and a proper place for (democratic) political life. For instance, William James, in criticizing the conditions of Gilded Age politics, called for “people who are willing to espouse failure as their vocation. I wish *that* could be organized. It would soon pass into its

¹⁰⁸ One might include Thomas Dumm's work in this list, particularly his essay “Political Theories for Losers” (Dumm 2000), but I take his interest in loss to come from a different impulse. His goal is to “reinspirit life in the face of loss” in a way that seems to hold close to a humanist vision that the thinkers I engage here move away from. Instead, these thinkers pursue failure and loss as a risky practice that must be taken up with no great faith (though perhaps with some hope) for re-inspiration.

opposite" (James 2000 [1895]). Thus, James suggested that people should "raise an impotent row" against the collusion of moneyed interests and politics (1992 [1895]).¹⁰⁹ There is a certain humorous sarcasm in this notion of an "impotent row" for with it James acknowledges the impossibility of complete failure even as he calls for the attempt and holds out hope that it might change something. Thus, James demonstrates the paradoxical movement in this approach to failure. On the one hand, his admission of the "impotence" of raising a row against the collusion of money and politics admits a kind of futile, though worthwhile, quality in the project of protest. On the other, James reveals his melioristic outlook in affirming that this pursuit of failure might "soon pass into its opposite," ultimately breaking apart these powerful institutions.

As tempting as it may be to follow James's meliorism, I would like to hold in suspense for a while this hope for a move from failure to success and instead consider what a political project of failure might look like if we could suspend this (perhaps more gratifying) move toward success. To do so, I want to consider for a moment the context of queer theory and its relationship to failure and refusal. The experiences of queer lives and the work of queer theory have—for a long time now—persisted in this alienated, suspended relation to the possibility of failure and success. Certainly, at times the pursuit of refusal and the experience of failure in queer life is primarily, as

¹⁰⁹ James takes up failure under a different valence—as an essential aspect of human experience—in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "Failure, then, failure! so the world stamps us at every turn. We strew it without blunders, our misdeeds, our lost opportunities, with all the memorials of our inadequacy to our vocation. And with what a damning emphasis does it then blot us out! No easy fine, no mere apology or formal expiation, will satisfy is soaked with all its blood. The subtlest forms of suffering known to man are connected with the poisonous humiliations incidental to these results. And they are pivotal human experiences!" (1987 [1902]: 130). I owe thanks to Alex Livingston for pointing me to James's invocations of failure (Livingston 2013).

Butler has suggested, about survival in conditions of abjection from accepted forms of life and kinship. At others, the project of refusal has been taken up in a creative attempt to establish a new way outside of more conventional ways of life. Queer communities, like the Van Dykes of the 1970's, have long recognized the potential power of rejecting normative demands of identity and belonging. The Van Dykes, in an attempt to escape the limits of patriarchal culture and the binary of man/woman, formed nomadic communities of "womyn" that excluded all men and celebrated the experience of lesbian sex and friendship. These womyn self-consciously rejected the heterosexist demands of norms of kinship, sex, and politics. In some measure, they clearly succeeded both for a time before they broke apart and through their legacy in the continuation of a small, but vibrant community of van and RV communities (Levy 2009). Yet, the terms of their success were always beyond the normative models of sex and kinship, and their ultimate "failure" in their breaking apart makes the terms of that success difficult to qualify. The womyn of the Van Dykes at times describe their movement in terms of refusal and even failure, even when they are bound up like Hamm and Clov in a relationship to normative life that they can never fully escape.

Feeling Backwards (and Forwards)

NELL (*elegiac*): Ah yesterday!¹¹⁰

From her position in a trash bin in the small cell of *Endgame*, Nell's experience of the past takes on this position of longing for something that has been lost. Beckett

¹¹⁰ Beckett 1958: 20. "Ah yesterday" is Nell's refrain throughout the play the invocation of the past.

wants to acknowledge this sense of loss and longing and simultaneously to silence it (a desire seen in Hamm's repeated demand that Clov "bottle her"). In so doing, he presents a complicated relationship between the past, present, and future and a desire to undo any smooth narrative that might help us to make sense of one or the other. As with Beckett's characters, for many queer theorists the experience of queer life is framed by the experience of loss, one that should be held on to against easy narratives of progress in overcoming the rejection and alienation of queer experience. Heather Love, in a succinct statement of the position, argues for a position of "feeling backwards" which affirms the experience of loss by refusing to turn from it to an easier narrative of progress. She writes, "Backwards feelings serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress. Most important, they show us that we do not know what is good for politics" (Love 2007: 27). Love makes an important point in cautioning against the political narratives that would incautiously endorse a smooth story of progress of increasing inclusion for queer, or any other, marginalized experience. For Love, the experience of feeling backward allows us to slow down the move to dominant logics of recognition and inclusion, which have been shown to reinforce the very conditions that they seek to overcome (cf. Brown 1993). She, likewise, suggests that feeling backwards also cautions against looking to the past as a kind of "golden age" of better times.

Backwards feeling, then, seems like an important counter to the narratives of success that depend on heteronormative ideals of kinship and reproduction.

However, this kind of backward looking can also give rise to another problem that Beckett warns against. The trouble with looking back is that it places too much faith in the experience of the past to provide a helpful brake on the present (and the future). For instance, as I argued in chapters 2 and 3, Judith Butler's turn to past experiences of violation can too easily lead to a kind of melancholic ethics, one that gives up on political institutions as a means to redress these experiences of loss and harm (cf. Honig 2010). Further, when taken to an extreme, this focus on the queer experience of loss and alienation can lead to a view of queer life as oriented toward a radical antisociality and anti-politics, as in the work of Lee Edelman. Edelman views queer life as inherently antisocial in its inability (and refusal) to live up to the demands of capitalist and heteronormative reproduction and sociability. In Edelman's polemical case against the logics of reproduction and futurism that saturate contemporary capitalist society, he call for a queer "no future" as a radical demand for the rejection of the logic of reproduction that drives dominant forms of heteronormativity and neo-liberal capitalist projects and politics. In a highly polemical style, Edelman writes: "For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* a social order (2004: 2-3). Beckett's pursuit of failure and the end of meaning echoes something like Edelman's sentiment here. However,

there is an important difference, for Edelman's refusal of politics calls for a kind of pure refusal that Beckett recognizes is impossible. Beckett's work is fruitful for thinking through the possibilities and alienations of politics and contemporary life because he resists the urge for purity even as he recognizes its lure.

In response to Edelman's "negative" approach to queer theory, Judith Halberstam has recently attempted to lay out a different vision of a "queer art of failure" that refuses "to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline" while pursuing through queer experience new modes of sociality and politics. As she writes, the queer art of failure turns its attention "to the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (Halberstam 2011: 88). Against the antisocial movement in queer thought, she argues for a view that provides a "map of political paths not taken, though it does not chart a completely separate land" (2011: 19). Yet, unlike James, Halberstam resists the narrative that the pursuit of failure might be oriented toward its future success. We see this resistance in her only reference to Beckett in which she reads Beckett's famous line from *Worstward Ho*, "fail again, fail better," as indicative of a tendency, "to give way to a desire for oddly normative markers of success and achievement" (2011: 186). This reading echoes a popular reading of Beckett's "fail again, fail better" as a mark of his enduring humanism—as a statement of human resilience in the face of all that opposes it.

But Beckett's work resists this kind of melioristic reading, and it is here that I would like to mark here two important distinctions between the approach that I am taking to Beckett on failure and the one articulated by Halberstam. First is a matter of genre. For Halberstam, following Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, the queer art of failure is best pursued on the terrain of low theory (2011: 15-17), rejecting as patriarchal and hegemonic texts that are read as classics or part of the tradition (presumably including Beckett). In fact, she attributes the antisocial orientation of Edelman¹¹¹ to his narrow range of traditional sources, particularly his dependence on the psychoanalytic tradition. Halberstam makes an important point in rejecting the authority of tradition in pursuing this project, but she goes too far in foreclosing the possibility of appropriating these sources for other purposes. Beckett himself worked to challenge traditional questions of the philosophical tradition not by rejecting them, but by parodying them in order to undo their grip on our self-understanding, as in his ambiguous invocation of the Eubulides paradox.¹¹²

Second, then, is the orientation to this project of failure. Halberstam's project takes up a great range of "low theory" sources from *Spongebob Squarepants* to the

¹¹¹ Halberstam also includes Leo Bersani in the camp of "antisocial" queer theorists, but as becomes clear in the chapter, I resist this reading of Bersani. Not only am I indebted to Bersani and Dutoit's reading of Beckett here and to Bersani's understanding of political "mattering" in Chapter 2, but I also find in Bersani a project of finding an alternate social order and experience of pleasure alongside the ordered world of much of Western thought and theories of sexuality.

¹¹² As Michael Worton argues, Beckett leaves open the question of who the "old Greek" is, thus inviting the kind of speculation that has led critics to read the "old Greek" as Eubulides, Zeno (who is the author of some of the most famous Greek paradoxes), and even the skeptic Sextus Empiricus. Worton cites Hugh Kenner who suggests that Beckett is also referring here to Sextus Empiricus's use of the heap as an example "to show that the simplest words - words like 'heap' were in fact empty of meaning" (cited in Worton 1994: 80).

movie *Dude Where's My Car?* as she celebrates the "losers" of society as embodiments of the art of failure. But this very pursuit of low theory can easily lead, as it does in Halberstam's work, to a certain glibness about the conditions of failure as a mode of life in which we "quietly" lose. There is nothing quiet about the challenges (and potential of) the pursuit of failure that I have considered here.¹¹³ Beckett's work, instead, places rather brutally on display the desperate conditions of late modern life, even as he sees the impossibility of escaping them, and the need to go on. We need only to include the lines that precede "fail again, fail better" to see this point at work in Beckett: "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." (Beckett 1995: 89). In the context of these previous lines, Beckett undermines the idea of progress in the process of failing again (and better). For Beckett this cycle of trial and failure is unending, though he does seem to hold out some hope for a better form of failure. Nevertheless, Beckett's view of failing better is not that it might lead to a more successful end.

Thus, Beckett resists the demands that we might put on the play if we were searching for some sort of redemption or damnation. Against moralistic demands for authenticity as the goal of human life, either as the recovery of a common essence or as a pure refusal of one as in Edelman's position, Beckett renders such a pursuit

¹¹³ José Esteban Muñoz has developed a slightly different vision of queer failure that falls somewhere between Halberstam's pursuit of "low theory" and my pursuit of failure and alienation in Beckett. Muñoz analyzes the performances of independent queer performers like Jack Smith, Dynasty Handbag, and My Barbarian, who he claims "perform failure." As he writes, "The artists thematize failure as being something like the *always already* status of queers and other minoritarian subjects in the dominant social order within which they toil. Queer failure, as I argue, is more nearly about escape and a certain kind of virtuosity" (2009: 173).

ultimately impossible by replacing narrative with repetitive dialogue and a narratable life with amnesiac memories.¹¹⁴ *Endgame* contains important narrative moments, but these moments are marked by their incompleteness, their self-consciousness, and their inability to produce a linear narrative or history for the characters. Take Hamm's Christmas story, which is announced as "story time" and punctuated by self-conscious appraisals of his telling of the story. "Nicely put, that." "A bit feeble, that." (1958: 51–52).¹¹⁵ The story thus remains ambiguous about whether it is just a performance of a story that Hamm has made up, or if it is a third-person telling of the story of Hamm's being rescued as a boy, or perhaps even the story of Hamm taking Clov in. In the incompleteness and self-consciousness of Hamm's performance Beckett staves off the demand for narrative authenticity in order to highlight the repetitive and performative aspects of these narratives themselves. In the case of Nagg and Nell, the past is marked with a nostalgia, as seen in Nell's refrain of "ah yesterday" that can only speculate about a time when expression and experience seemed to coincide. As such, the memory of the past can only really register in the affects and effects that it might create in the present, though in the case of Nagg and Nell the affects are very few. They want to look to the past for some assurance of their ongoing connection but the old stories

¹¹⁴ I am thinking here not only of Sartrean existentialism, with which Beckett would have been familiar, but also of contemporary variations of the themes of authenticity like those in Charles Taylor (1992) and Martha Nussbaum (1988). Nussbaum, following a kind of Aristotelian definition of narrative coherence in her commentary on Beckett, albeit in the context of his "trilogy" of novels, reads Beckett's resistance to narration as a failure to allow narrative to do its transformative work on the emotions on the characters or their audience.

¹¹⁵ As Stanley Cavell argues, Beckett "never lets them [the audience] forget that those on the stage are acting, and know they are acting" and he does so by creating the experience that "no one in the place, on the stage or in the house, knows better than anyone else what is happening" (Cavell 2002: 157–158).

provide little help in this pursuit. Their attempt at memory, instead, falls short of providing this assurance. As with Love's approach, the incompleteness and inaccuracy of their memories cautions against the project of "feeling backward" as a means to recover a golden age of meaning and experience, but unlike with Love the past here provides little help for slowing down or navigating the present. Here the past cannot secure the present or the future.

Thus, Beckett purposefully works against traditional images of thought and action, against the idea that either must have an identifiable beginning in a reflexive sense of self and a identifiable end which can then provide a clear basis for future action. Instead, *Endgame* is marked by a repetitive structure that tends more toward entropy than to order, stimulation, or action. Absent an outside context, everything is winding down—they are running out of provisions, their health is failing, Nell apparently dies, and so on. They even seem incapable of killing the rat which Clov leaves half-dead. Their actions appear to have lost all possibility for either usefulness or the revealing of agency. For every time Beckett opens the possibility that an action may begin or meaning might form, he almost immediately revokes its grounds. The examples are copious: Nagg is given a biscuit, as a possibility for nourishment, but he can hardly eat it for his lack of teeth (13 and 66); Clov hands Hamm the gaff with which to push himself around, but he finds the wheels of his chair gummed up (43); Clov begins to laugh at Hamm's story, perhaps as a relief from despair, but cannot go on laughing (10). Yet, Beckett's entropy can never be quite fully reached. As Worton

describes it, “Instead of following the tradition which demands that a play have an exposition, a climax and a denouement, Beckett's plays have a cyclical structure which might indeed be better described as a diminishing spiral” (Worton 1994: 70). Some form of salvation, as Bersani and Dutoit point out, might be found in ending the story, in “completing the narrative arc,” and yet Beckett always denies this completion to his characters and us (1993: 7). With Beckett, neither point on the arch that mark some form of agency—neither intentionality nor action—is ever really able to get off the ground.¹¹⁶

To put this project another way, Beckett is concerned with limits—whether the limit that when crossed marks the beginning of something (as in Hamm’s invocation: “Me—to play”) or the limit that when crossed marks the end or death (as that for which we are all waiting in *Endgame*). Yet, unlike other pursuits of limits in modern thought, for Beckett the conditions of beginning and ending, intentionality and its results, are not transcendental conditions of possibility or boundaries to be crossed over. Whereas the Kantian project seeks our limits in order to respect them and the early Foucaultian-Deleuzian project seeks these limits in order to cross them, Beckett and his characters

¹¹⁶ Judith Butler has made a similar point on the value of the failures of narration, though her responses to it have varied significantly. In “Doing Justice to Someone” Butler takes a more “active” position in her assertion that justice can only be done when we stop requiring that one speak in pre-given normative terms. In contrast, she takes a more passive position in *Giving An Account of Oneself* (2005), where she argues that the impossibility of giving a full narrative account of our lives should lead to a more capacious ethical attitude attuned to our common incompleteness, finitude, and vulnerability. I take the former position as more active—and more amenable to politics—because it issues from a kind of demand for justice, even when the content of that justice cannot be determined in advance, rather than an orientation toward ethical openness that seems less committed to disrupting the power of dominant norms.

approach limits asymptotically. As we have seen, Beckett and his characters never quite reach a threshold of beginning or ending. On one hand, the play never seems to begin because it seems almost to have been over from the beginning, and no real action ever seems to commence.¹¹⁷ On the other, the play is always leading to the uncertainty of things possibly, or probably, running out. As such, Beckett establishes a odd relationship to alienation and the terms of existence. Unlike with Kant, our best hope is not in recognizing the boundaries of our capabilities and in working to banish error or ameliorate our illusions. And unlike the apparent¹¹⁸ Foucaultian-Deleuzian project of crossing limits, Beckett's enterprise is to see what happens when we approach the limits of language, meaning, and intention as borders that we can never quite reach, understand, or cross over. As Bersani and Dutoit suggest, Beckett's work performs "the mobility of boundaries" and "the uncertain nature of the very tracing of boundaries" (1993: 7). To fail better, for Beckett, is to get closer to approach ever more closely limits of this project of failure and escape, even as we remain suspended.

Idiots?

HAMM: Back to my place!
(Clov pushes chair back to center.)
 Is that my place?
 CLOV: Yes, that's your place.

¹¹⁷ Bersani and Dutoit thus write, "Our suspense as spectators or readers depends on our pretending not to know that we have been given a finished product, a product secure in and about its ending from the very start" (1993: 39).

¹¹⁸ I suggest that the Foucaultian-Deleuzian project is only "apparently" aimed at crossing boundaries because, as I argued in Chapter 4, they both also recognize the impossibility of crossing over these limits in any "pure" or permanent way.

HAMM: Am I right in the center?
CLOV: I'll measure it.
HAMM: More or less! More or less!
CLOV (*moving chair slightly*): There!
HAMM: I'm more or less in the center?
CLOV: I'd say so.
HAMM: You'd say so! Put me right in the center.
CLOV: I'll go and get the tape.
HAMM: Roughly! Roughly!
(*Clov moves chair slightly.*)
Bang in the center!

This scene of Clov pushing Hamm around in his chair is one of the most ridiculous (and funny) in *Endgame*, and it illustrates the kind of game that they are playing, at times with even a bit of enjoyment. We can imagine the scene as one of presumed, but failed, sovereignty. Indeed, Beckett acknowledges the connection between *Endgame* and its reference to chess. He suggests that Hamm plays the king, but he plays badly (see Worton 1994: 71). Yet, the problem here is not as straightforward as chess where one player may just make bad use of the options available to him. In *Endgame* there is no board with defined positions and none of the players is able to make a move entirely on his own. Hamm demands to take up his position in his throne—a wheeled chair—in the center of the room, but must rely Clov whenever he wishes to reestablish his sovereign position. But Clov's inability to judge the center along with Hamm's apparent blindness, which keeps him from knowing precisely where he is, means that Hamm will never quite inhabit the sovereign position. Moreover, beyond the spatial dimension of sovereignty on humorous display here, Hamm continually runs up against his own inability to command the situation,

and despite his best efforts all of the other characters continue to defy or resist him.

Yet, this dynamic, of course, allows the game to go on. Instead, then, of a badly played game of chess, *Endgame* shows us that we all play badly at the game of sovereignty—perhaps because it is a bad game—even as we feel the unending demand to attempt to act and make meaning in the world.

Thus, Robert Gilman suggests that Beckett intends to reveal the human caught up in this bind between the desire to be known as a subject (or to find justification for one's life) and the actuality that such a desire can never be satisfied. The compulsive need to play that is manifested throughout *Endgame*, for instance, in Hamm's refusal to stop playing even at Clov's plaintive request to end, is an attempt to cover the void between the way things are and the way they wish them to be (1988: 83).¹¹⁹ For Gilman, the focus on play reveals that the ways that humans speak and act as attempts to express ourselves are always "artificial" and are "never directly true" (1988: 85). Indeed, one of the most poignant ways that we experience alienation is through the failure of intention and failures of meaning. And certainly there is no shortage of laments for this failure in literature, philosophy, and politics. Yet, Beckett, at least here, plays with failure and makes it funny (and thus comes closer to Halberstam's understanding of the queer art of failure). Beckett, then, suggests in an oblique way that perhaps one of the best modes through which to pursue failure and its peculiar agency is through the parodic or through play. These modes have often been

¹¹⁹ Gilman helpfully links this reading to Hugh Kenner's notion that *Endgame* is a play about playing, a fact revealed through the tragically ridiculous setting—the trash cans, things covered in sheets, the bizarre ailments afflicting the characters, and so on (1988: 83).

denigrated in politics as an indulgence, as a sign of the alienation of capital, and as simply not serious enough to the task of politics. But read through queer perspectives of failure, we can find in Beckett a curious form of life in failure and play.

In order to push this point a bit further and to provide some traction for understanding how this project matters for politics, I want to consider Deleuze's use of the figure of the idiot, for certainly we see in Beckett's characters (and perhaps in Beckett the author, if I dare suggest) a kind of idiocy.¹²⁰ Though Deleuze and Guattari's own use of the idiot remains somewhat vague in *What is Philosophy?* (as well as in Deleuze's use of the idiot in *Difference and Repetition*), Isabelle Stengers finds in their invocation of the idiot a persona that can dramatize, in a way similar to the picture of queer theory I have drawn here, the struggle against dogmatism and dominant norms, and thus open a new approach to cosmopolitan politics.¹²¹ For Stengers the value of the idiot is that he "slows the others down" and "resists the consensual way in which the [political or cosmopolitical] situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action" (2005: 994). The idiot for Stengers does not give up on knowledge or the possibility of a common politics developing, but it refuses an authoritative role in determining or possessing "the meaning of what we know" (2005: 994). Thus, much like the queer project of failure or Love's notion of feeling backwards, a politics that models itself on the conceptual persona of the idiot is

¹²⁰ For a reading of Beckett through the work of Deleuze and Guattari, see Garin Dowd (2007).

¹²¹ Deleuze's own use of the figure of the idiot remains tantalizingly vague and appears mainly in *What is Philosophy?* coauthored with Guattari. As Stengers points out, Deleuze borrows the figure of the idiot from Dostoyevsky, but he and Guattari turn it into a conceptual personae which they use in their philosophical and political project (Stengers 2005: 994).

“incapable,” or at least unwilling, “of giving a ‘good’ definition of the procedures that allow us to achieve the ‘good’ definition’ of a ‘good’ common world” (2005: 995). In other words, this image of politics refuses the demands and criteria of political “goods” according to taken for granted or commonsensical models of the good. Instead, such a politics (and for Stengers the cosmos is the primary operator of the figure of the idiot in so far as it can resist our demands and slow us down) works through a process of “equalization.” Equalization, then, works against unbalanced forms of power that create unequal distributions of power.

This approach to politics resonates with the argument of this dissertation which has worked against the model of recovery as the proper end of politics and ethics. Stengers and her politics of the idiot refuses “what is most important,” particularly the “idea that ‘good’ politics has to embody a form of universal emancipation” (2005: 1001). Thus, Stengers’ idea of a cosmopolitics and the persona of the idiot works against the forms of humanism that pose politics as a problem of alienation and recovery—whether in the context of recognition of universal vulnerability, material conditions of production, or in experiences of subjectivity. Instead, Stengers suggests that a politics inspired by the figure of the idiot calls for a common world that is “free to emerge from the multiplicity of disparate links” without pre-given constraints or commonsensical criteria of the good. It is not particularly difficult to see how this form of politics is manifested in movements like that of the Van Dykes or, more recently, of Occupy Wall Street (OWS). OWS took up a kind of political project of failure, not

because the project “failed” when the camps were ultimately displaced by police (often in form of riot police, despite the peacefulness of the encampments), but because the assemblies refused the traditional political model of issuing a definite list of demands that could become the point of negotiation, or subsumption, into existing policy positions or structures. Moreover, the movement was made up of those who many in both media and society referred to as the “losers” or “failures” of society—the unemployed, the heavily indebted, and critics of capitalism.¹²²

It may be a bit more difficult at times to see how a similar model of politics might emerge out of Beckett. My claim here is less that Beckett can become a model for politics and more that Beckett’s dramas, in laying bare the conditions of alienation, suspension, and failure in contemporary life, thematize the challenges from which meaning and action must emerge and with which they must contend. The fact that Beckett pushes the unending demand or impulse for creating meaning in spite of its apparent impossibility creates and dramatizes a nascent social-political scene from which possibilities for action performatively emerge. Yet, we are left with a politics of the subjunctive, one in which we act in a state of suspension and alienation. Seen in this way, the characters on the stage are acting not in an active mood, but in a subjunctive one in which they must work and play at creating a livable social world within the cell. Hamm acts as if he is the sovereign, demanding his place in the center

¹²² These examples might also be read as moments of “fugitive democracy,” as Sheldon Wolin (1994) puts it, or irruptions of politics within a given police order in Ranciere’s terms (1999 [1995]), but these are modes of explanation that I am seeking to avoid here, for they tend to lead us to see moments of politics or democracy as exceptional and fleeting – a position that I think the concept of “failure” will work against.

of the room. Clov acts as if he might leave, though he continually finds that for some reason he cannot. Thus, we see them acting in a state of alienation and suspension between the possibility of success and the intractability of failure in their struggle for meaning, power, and agency. Through the repetitive enactment of some desired state of affairs, acting *as if*, perhaps they and we can change the context for action. Though this kind of change may not be revolutionary— Hamm cannot go out with a bang, despite his great wishes—it might happen nonetheless. Though Beckett might reject the possibility of the emergence of a common world or of anything truly definitive happening—indeed, his dramas even work against these possibilities—I read both Beckett the writer and the characters of *Endgame* as players in a role of something like the idiot. As Bersani and Dutoit suggest, there is a strange form of power in this pursuit of failure and resistance. Against the suggestion that such pursuits might be "merely impotent, perhaps even suicidal protests in the margins of culture," they argue that "there is nothing to be lost in our foundering with the notion of getting lost, and there even something exhilarating in the idea of joyful self-dismissal giving birth to a new kind of power" (1993: 8–9).¹²³ This kind of power is evident in queer pursuits of failure and disruption as well as movements like OWS that seek to throw off the demands of traditional politics.

¹²³ This position resonates with Bersani's notion of self-shattering that has earned him the reputation of taking an "anti-social" approach to queer theory and life. Bersani's argument, though, is more subtle. He notes that moments of pleasure (particularly sexual pleasure) require a kind of self-shattering that interrupts our attempts to hold together a coherent narrative account of ourselves. Thus, it is not that we dislike others, or having sex with them. Instead, we tend to both to desire and dislike the experience of shattering that attend them. See Bersani's *The Freudian Body* (1986) and "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987).

This kind of power echoes both Foucault's call for the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" and the development of non-disciplinary forms of power as well as Deleuze and Guattari's pursuit of ways of life outside of stratifying regimes of power. And as I noted in the last chapter, the political efficacy of this kind of project may be risky. Beckett's work, too, cautions against moving too quickly in these liberatory directions. As he writes of his own practice as an artist:

What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos, and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist. (quoted in Worton, "Waiting for Godot and Endgame: Theatre as Text, 74.)

The pursuit of failure and the figure of the idiot both open themselves to letting in a bit of the chaos that much of Western thought and politics have excluded. The issue here is one more of form than of content. In other words, the problem for the contemporary artist is to work on a form that allows for difference to multiply within a given frame. This project entails the attempt to resist or even fail the dominant structures of art and meaning when they do not allow this bit of chaos in. Likewise, I have been arguing for a form of political thought that resists the drive both to enforce dominant norms of politics and to turn from those norms to an ethical grounding of politics in a common human essence. Beckett's image of the human condition in late modern life exceeds these drives by refusing them and confounding them. The theorists I have engaged

throughout this project, likewise, open up their understanding of politics in order to break apart monolithic images of power and universal human conditions.

The (Impossible) Heap

HAMM (*anguished*): What's happening, what's happening?

CLOV: Something is taking its course.¹²⁴

In this world of the suspensions, failures, and of the indeterminacy of meaning, these characters are not *simply* hung up. The playing does appear to have an effect, and here the possibility of agency and meaning begins to emerge. Through the repetitive stories, inane chatter, and bitter exchanges, we find that the characters are acting in such a way to bring things to an end—to make something happen. As Clov tells us, "Something is taking its course." As Elin Diamond, in a reading of *Waiting for Godot* that proves applicable here, suggests of the characters, "Their duologues are more than the time-passing antics of existential clowns; they are exercises in negotiating power relations without coercive identifications" (2000: 41). Indeed, we find that there are moments of "progress" from time to time, though like Deleuze's and Stengers's idiot, Beckett slows this progress down to avoid the rush to resolution. Hamm, at one point, asks, "We're not beginning . . . to . . . mean something?" (1958: 32). These moments should not suggest that Beckett is falling back upon a notion of deliberative rationality that might emerge from these suspended world, for there is a certain trepidation in these remarks that exhibits a fear or reluctance that coming to

¹²⁴ Beckett 1958: 13.

mean something might end the game. To succeed appears to risk getting recaptured by from the dominant order of sense which Beckett and his characters both revel in and suffer from. If there is meaning and deliberation here, it is the deliberation of the idiot who is unable or unwilling to meet the demands of dogmatic rationality. Instead, the arrival of meaning comes in fits and starts in the ongoing struggle and play of failing. Beckett's work, in fact, marks the ineliminability of the social world, even when one tries to escape it or bring it to an end in various ways. Instead, to fail better is to do nothing other than to act, or attempt to act, again and again—to continue to challenge normative conceptions and administrative orders while recognizing the impossibility of doing away with them once and for all. A certain success may attend these efforts, but for Beckett it is never complete or total. Beckett leaves us suspended between success and failure, between the rejection of the world and a humanist embrace of it.

Finally, Beckett returns to another version of the paradox of the heap near the end of the play. Hamm, this time, says: "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of...that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life" (Beckett 1958: 70). We now see that the paradox exemplifies the suspended state that Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell find themselves in. Yet, both Clov and Hamm have a different answer to the paradox. As we learned at the beginning of the play, for Clov life's moments simply add up to a heap at which time, he "can't be punished anymore" (1958: 1). We might take his reading as one of relief, if not redemption. For Hamm, the frustration of his condition continue even as the moments to mount up to a

life: he just goes on, "Ah let's get it over!" (1958: 70). We are left feeling that no matter how he envisions life and its end, he sees the only relief in its end. In both of these cases we find again the notion that neither of the characters is the actor/agent of his own life. Both of them are rendered waiting for the heap to mount up/for things to come to an end in the face of the alienation of life with its unpredictable events and often unsure meanings. No effective movement out of the situation is possible. As they constantly remind us, "outside of here, it's death." And as we see in the case of the flea, the rat, and of Nell, inside the cell is death as well.

Yet, I want to suggest that the possibility of Clov's leaving at the end of the play serves as an indication, albeit narrow and difficult to read, that there is a chance of something happening, some change coming about, out of the barren world of the cell. Throughout the play, Clov and Hamm have played at their quasi-serious repetitions of threatening to leave, to end it all. Finally, then, something seems to change when Clov reports having spotted a boy outside the window of the cell. Hamm says to Clov with some conviction, "It's the end, Clov, we've come to end. I don't need you any more," and Clov replies, "I'll leave you" (Beckett 1958: 79). Clov then describes a possible new perspective on the world, one in which one learns to see things clearly and suffer the world better. This perspective will perhaps even bring some relief from his fear of punishment declared at the start. But, predictably, Beckett now begins to darken this moment of clarity, and Clov finds himself suspended between this new possibility and

the belief that he's too old for "new habits" (1958: 80–81). The last the play tells of Clov is that he is dressed for the road, though we never hear if he leaves.¹²⁵

In some sense, Beckett has left us suspended once again for we do not know where, or whether, they will go after the curtain falls. Still, we might wonder if these Hamm and Clov, in repetitively, subjunctively playing out their wish to see the end of their untenable, co-dependent relationship, serve to bring about a change. It may not be redemptive, but maybe it makes a difference. These "events" at the end are perhaps like a lot of life's happenings. We never really know what, if anything, is occurring until it has passed, for the scene is always in process of becoming. We are often brought to a point where it seems like things are about to change significantly one way or another, and then the curtain falls. Yet, the curtain falling is something definitive in itself, too.¹²⁶ With its falling, we also see that Clov did not leave; the play is over and there is no more action to unfold. Here we realize with Bersani and Dutoit that Beckett has also given us "a product secure in and about its ending from the very start" (1993: 39). The undecidability of this moment can, then, be surprisingly thrilling. For Beckett has left us suspended where we started: with the experience of a (human) life as a bridge and not an end and the challenge to let a little bit of the chaos in in order to see what can be played.

¹²⁵ Likewise, at the end of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir says to Estragon: Well? Shall we go? ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. [*They do not move.*] (Beckett 2011 [1954]: 85).

¹²⁶ I thank Katrin Pahl for pointing me in this direction.

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Curriculum Vitae

Drew Walker was born on December 25, 1978, in Houston, Texas. He earned a B.A., summa cum laude, in Philosophy and Religious Studies from Millsaps College in Jackson, MS. He then went on to earn a Master of Theological Studies at Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Before attending Johns Hopkins he taught religious studies in secondary schools for four years. His interests and pursuits in political theory include poststructuralism, critical theory, queer and feminist theory, literary theory, and philosophies of the law and the state.